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# A TRAVELLER'S WAR

## Alaric Jacob

**A**LARIC JACOB is known and respected by millions of readers as a war correspondent of the *Daily Express*. The material for his book has been gathered over a period of two years from June 1941 to June 1943. During that time he covered some 40,000 miles and indeed it is primarily, he says, not a war book at all but a book of travel. As might be expected, the range of his experience is enormous and all his accounts bear the imprint of an adventurous and alive personality, eager for the events of the day whether he is campaigning in Libya, sightseeing in the fairy-tale cities of the Levant, journeying through the Persian mountains with a wounded passenger and a distraught driver or sampling the splendours of Imperial Delhi. He writes too of the remarkable exploits of Brigadier Wingate's troops with whom he spent some time fighting behind the Japanese lines in Burma.

The book ends with his impressions of the Soviet Union in the late summer of 1943, and weighing up his two years of travel, Mr. Jacob points out that for the ordinary soldier at least this has not been a war of mud and trenches. To many it has brought opportunities of seeing the world which would never have come their way in peace time. It has been a traveller's war and as such, excellent training for the world citizens of the future.





# A TRAVELLER'S WAR

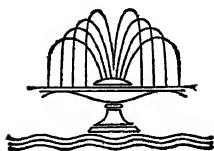


# A TRAVELLER'S WAR

A JOURNEY TO THE WARS IN  
AFRICA, INDIA AND RUSSIA

*by*

ALARIC JACOB



*Collins*

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1944

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TO IRIS  
*After Ten Years*

*The Author's thanks are due first to the management of Reuters and then to the Editor of the "Daily Express" for successively giving him the opportunity to make the journey described in this book.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### LONDON TO CAPE COLONY

THERE ARE NOT many ways of saying good-bye, when one is going away for a long while.

One can face the fact in all its starkness, one can just try to ignore it or one can play a game of make-believe with oneself, a game of "maybe the war will end soon . . . maybe I'll manage to get leave after a while" . . . and so on.

I chose the last method, the most cowardly but then, I had employed it before. On going to France the year before, of course one had known that from there home leave was always possible, but one had not known whether it would come in a matter of months, or in over a year. But at the end of May, 1941, I left London for Egypt in the certain knowledge that I would not see England again for a very long time—possibly several years. So what did I do? I pretended first to myself and then, when I was word perfect, to my wife that although I would not return it might be possible for her to follow me out there. Had I not done so, I don't think I could have faced the future at all. Thousands of soldiers face just such a prospect, and manfully. But the soldier has no choice. At that time I was, like all war correspondents, a volunteer and, pampered creatures though we were, we did enjoy some choice. I need not have gone. I could have hung on at home although in the course of the next year or so I might have found myself in the army anyhow and drafted out to India for a five-year spell, willy-nilly. True. But what matters when one is still outside the army, with the power to decide one's own fate, is the painful exercise of free will itself and the knowledge that one is tearing oneself away from those one loves of one's own volition, before the necessity for the sacrifice arises.

Here was I, who had once been bright and young, but now, at thirty-two, had come to a time when I began to detect myself looking down at children in the street and thinking unashamedly,

"There's an attractive kid—I *like* these urchins with carrotty hair"—here was I relinquishing these sweet possibilities for long, perhaps for ever.

Here was I taking Iris to a last dinner at the Café Royal, talking quite brightly as though I fully expected to see her in Cairo in a couple of months' time, clinking glasses over inanely optimistic toasts, cutting the evening so fine that we got to the station just as the doors of the sleeping-car were being slammed and then, while my kit was being pitched in at the window, barely having time to touch her cheek before the train began to move and I was obliged to jump on to the running-board.

In the blue light of the black-out her small, pale face was swallowed up with frightening suddenness. Swallowed up as though it had never been there. I continued to lean out of the window mechanically waving, waving at nothing.

Then I sat down on my berth and understood for the first time just what this was going to mean. Never in eight years had I left her for long, except that time when she came back from Washington six weeks before I did. And that was different. Merely preceding me home. But now I was going away of my own will, abandoning that which had been rare and ideal in favour of something I could not put a name to. Every soldier who has volunteered for foreign service will understand what I mean.

It seemed to me then, and it does to-day nearly three years later, that at that moment I was committing an enormity.

And for what? I hadn't been drafted. There was no persuasive nonsense about "Your King and Country Needs You." Having been a war correspondent in France, run into a German ambush at Evreux without damage and come safe away from Brest a good twelve hours ahead of the enemy, I had no illusions about the 'glory' of the profession. Somebody has to write up wars in the newspapers. It's an essential job of work, but not one of transcendental importance. And the men who do it aren't figures of romance. Just reporters in uniform. Some turn out to be brave and resourceful, others ought never to receive the Army's Licence.

As I sat there in the dark carriage wondering what compulsion out of the subconscious had driven me into this consuming folly—

the blind urge to travel, perhaps? or a mere lust for change as a virtue in itself?—my mind was kneading hard upon one central and consoling thought.

You have already travelled far, thought I, since that day twelve years ago when you walked by chance into a drawing-room in Devon and there met a girl who seemed to you the most beautiful creature on whom your eyes had ever rested. You have travelled far, yet never had cause to alter that first opinion, though you have met with many a famous beauty since and sampled the wit of some of them. And that is a fact of such a size and shape and splendour as you are unlikely to match in all your journeyings to come—be they never so distant, last they never so long.

Next morning, in the hotel, my eye was caught by a tall blonde girl who sat in the lounge like a statue, obviously waiting for someone. Presently he came in, a naval officer with one of those Elizabethan beards. They came together quickly, like people who have been starved of one another for a long while. I learned he was a corvette captain on forty-eight hours' leave. And bitterly and foolishly I envied him; his job so much more dangerous than mine, yet his ship a home which would carry him back every so often to these real consolations which even in the smallest doses will keep men going in war-time almost indefinitely, but whose total deprivation makes them sour and hopeless. This view I subsequently found common among soldiers in Tobruk and other places where the land-bound fighter could see the seaman coming and going in what seemed like free relationship with the seaways which lead to home.

I went on board the Dutch ship *Meliskerk* in no happy frame of mind. But what I found on board was so immediately appealing to any lover of life that it was not long before my usually sanguine spirits revived.

In the tiny cabin with the green baize table-tops were gathered twenty passengers who had just been told that they might expect to spend six weeks in each other's company in a deckhouse no bigger overall than a family flat in London. They were looking at each other in an extremity of constraint. The scene resembled

act one of *Outward Bound*—that moment in the play when the oddly-assorted characters suddenly realise that the strange destination to which they are sailing is another world, and that they are all dead anyhow. And the personalities involved were of such a ripe and fruity consistency . . . nobody but a detective-novelist, you felt, would have ventured to juxtapose them.

There was the young typist, married only two weeks to the naval architect, going out to join him at the Simonstown naval base ; there was her friend, the jolly west country barmaid ; there was the grizzled business man with the very genteel manner who loved to talk of what was ' good form ' in the various clubs of which he was a member but who, after the tenth whisky and soda, took pride in revealing that as a boy he had slept on the counter of his father's shop in Hoxton ; there was Griffin, the old Straits trader, later known as " Archdeacon " because of his Guadalcanar appearance, who broke his fast with a double gin at nine o'clock in the morning ; there were two South African students going home to join the South African air force ; there was the Welsh collier skipper with the voice like a bell-buoy ; there was the would-be dowager just like the dowager-stooge in the Marx Brothers films. All these people in a little freighter of 5000 tons with five aeroplanes lashed on her decks and Heaven knows what explosive matter in the holds. Before many days had passed, much explosive matter had accumulated in the passenger saloon also and yet your detective-novelist would have been disappointed in that a Who-Dun-It never developed—no Body was ever found. The remedial action of copious liquor at pre-war prices coupled with the consciousness of much discomfort and some danger shared—these kept the peace throughout a voyage of 10,000 miles and a period of nearly seven weeks which was to take us past Newfoundland, within fifty miles of New York, due south past the West Indies to Pernambuco in Brazil and then through a South Atlantic gale safe to the Cape of Good Hope.

The solid Hollands food would have delighted Rembrandt (it seemed sinful to lie a mile off the Scottish coast and eat all the butter and eggs and bacon and oranges we wanted when every one ashore was strictly rationed), and the solid Dutch officers, with their chintz-hung cabins, centrally heated by cigar smoke,

had an aura of reassurance which must have comforted even those who had been torpedoed before. One felt that if we were sunk, the lifeboats would be sure to be provisioned with an assortment of cheeses and the best Hollands gin. And about half the passengers *had* been sunk before, in the *City of Nagpur*, and were making their second attempt to sail in a couple of weeks. The rest of us didn't know whether to consider them as Jonahs or, by the law of averages, good luck totems.

The *Meliskirk* herself had been in action. Escaping from the Netherlands during the German invasion, she had been attacked by Stukas: the purser showed me the bulge in her deck-plates where a bomb had penetrated without going off and photographs of the seamen phlegmatically heaving the thing overboard afterwards—still without causing an explosion!

*June 7th, 1941.*—After lying two days offshore and viewing with shame our orange peel and eggshells being carried inshore on the tide, we sail in a thirty-ship convoy with a number of corvettes and destroyers escorting. Disappointing that the large warship we saw some three miles off isn't coming too.

*June 8th.*—Heavy swell. Pass two heavily-laden troopships with two destroyers and two submarines escorting on the surface—an odd little convoy. Off a headland, two mines are sighted adrift. Our sailors try to explode them with rifle fire, but miss. One of the corvettes falls out of line to deal with them in a more professional manner.

In the afternoon, glorious sky and air, as pure and as deep blue as Italy. Only the slight nip in the air tells you that you are far north. Several islands visible. Hudson aircraft circling round us all day. Speed only about six knots. At this rate, we'll take months to get to Africa. Try some white Cape wine at dinner. What snobbery there is about continental wines! This stuff seems every bit as good as Riesling. Put it in a German bottle and I'd bet any one but a professional wine-taster would be deceived.

*June 9th.*—Awake to find the ship lying in a loch on the west coast of Scotland. What enormous anchorages they have up

here—this one looks large enough to house a fleet, and about as remote from air bombing as one could be and still remain in the British Isles. Water is like glass—and old blue Bristol at that, with the mountains reflected in it. Still snow on the peaks and a nipping air comes between the sun and oneself. Captain goes ashore to confer with the Commadore of the convoy. There are forty ships assembled here now. As he is going ashore, convention lays down that the captain should dress in ‘civvies.’ He takes some letters to post for us but as there is no railway here, I fancy they’ll take a long while to get to London. I like the way he puts the letters inside his trilby hat, then claps the hat on his head.

*June 10th.*—Before dawn we creep out of the loch and start sailing north. Stiff wind and cold, overcast sky. How superb this coastline is! I doubt if I shall see anything finer no matter where I go. The mountains on the mainland appear huge and endless in the sharp atmosphere; they remind me of the Atlas range, seen from the Bay of Gibraltar. Sit on deck reading Rex Warner’s *Wild Goose Chase*, surrealist stuff with a Marxist theme—characters living in a crazy atmosphere, but then, don’t we all?

*June 12th.*—In the first forty-eight hours we’ve logged only 400 miles. Rolling along at 8 knots over a glassy sea the embodiment of an advertisement for a Mediterranean cruise—perfect sailing weather, but as we are heading north vaguely in the direction of Iceland, there is a sharp little wind. A corvette comes alongside rolling horribly even in the calm and an officer at the rail bawls orders through a loudspeaker: Then the corvette turns away to give the same instructions to each of the thirty-nine other vessels.

Next to us I see for the first time one of those “Catfighter” ships with a Hurricane mounted on a catapult in the bows as protection against long-range Condor bombers. Several times a day the fighter’s engine is warmed up but the little freighter ships so much spray I can’t understand how the aircraft escapes damage by salt water. Once in the air, of course, the pilot has no means of getting down except by baling out with his parachute and

allowing the aircraft to crash clear of the convoy, or else trying to make a landing near his mother-ship. In rough weather I should think that would mean certain death. Yet they say pilots volunteer for this job. . . .

One of the ship's officers tells us he doesn't like smooth weather like this—makes it too easy for the submarine packs. In a real Atlantic storm with waves forty foot high, he consoles us, you will certainly never manage to launch the lifeboats, but on the other hand you are most unlikely to be torpedoed, because the height of the waves makes it impossible for the submarine to take proper aim from the low angle at which it shoots. We are enjoined to carry a lifebelt everywhere with us and to sleep in our clothes at night, and do so : the *Nagpur* survivors add that we should all keep our doors open as the shock of a torpedo explosion is apt to jam them, and the ports are too small to crawl through.

*June 13th.*—Rough sea, hard wind and lashing rain. Ship pitching heavily and a majority of passengers ill. During the night a few ships left the convoy to go to Iceland. Two fresh warships have joined us. Spend all day pacing the deck, considering what to write next. How acute are the pangs of authorship ! With me the period of parturition lasts many weeks, before I can even put pen to paper. My journalism comes easily : but writing anything a little more permanent, mighty hard. Literary stasis and journalistic diarrhoea at the same time, in the same patient. Irrational, when you think of the short life of the average book these days, to dash off a piece for the paper because you know it'll be on the spike in somebody's lean-to to-morrow, yet labour long on a book that may be pulped down in a few months.

*June 14th.*—If any one had told me a week ago that I could put down seven pink gins before dinner and still remain coherent, I would not have believed him—yet such was the softening effect of the "Archdeacon's" company and his account of how he spent a year alone on a Pacific island with huge land crabs his only living companions. "They were a sort of grey colour," said the archdeacon, "with the most bright, intelligent eyes : after a while I used to see them in all colours of the rainbow."



*June 17th.*—Three days of mist, cold and a greasy swell. No sign of even spring in these latitudes, although midsummer approaches. Walked five miles around the dripping deck to-day.

*June 20th.*—Off Newfoundland. Fog very thick, just as described by Kipling in *Captains Courageous*. Half expect to see a dory drift by with a millionaire's brat in it . . . Pass several Newfoundland sailing-boats, our foghorn going all the day . . . Halt several hours to do repairs to the engines and the convoy goes on without us. A corvette comes back in the evening, locates us through the fog with some difficulty and escorts us off to rejoin the convoy.

*June 22nd.*—Steaming alone at last, having left the convoy in the night. Most of them, I believe are going in to Halifax. Now we're on our own, off the coast of New England, and making better speed.

*June 23rd.*—Hear by ship's news the most important event of the war—Germany has invaded the U.S.S.R. Most of us can hardly believe it. The sun is out, it's real summer at last. By God, the sun is out for us, too. Do we in England really *deserve* this incredible stroke of fortune? And are we ready to take full advantage of it? I don't see how we can lose the war now, no matter how much we muddle. To think that Hitler was really so crazy as to attack the Russians when he might so much more profitably have fallen upon us, still the weaker target! )

The reaction of our old *refained* business-man is so typical I could hardly keep a straight face when he said it. Then I got mad, when I reckoned that there must still be many criminal old fools like this loose in the City of London and the Tory party . . . "The German Army will smash up the Russians in a few weeks," he said. And the *relish* with which he said it! I suggested the Russians would soon be our official allies. "They won't last long enough for that," he rejoined. "They won't last long enough for us to be bothered with them."

"Then the Germans will be free to attack us with everything they've got and crush us," I said. The old business-man snorted and said nothing.

After all the humiliation our arms have suffered in this war, after all the suffering of the blitz, I really believe this sort of man still hates Reds more than Germans, still thinks we are fighting the wrong war. Twenty years of solid lying and distortion by the whole British educational and information machine have done their work.

*June 25th.*—Whether it's just natural spleen, or chagrin because the first forty-eight hours have failed to bring news of the collapse of the Red Army, I know not—but our business-man let fall some pointed remarks to-day about young men who were not in uniform. My uniform is in my kitbag : as I'm only a hybrid militaire I conceive it ridiculous to wear it except when I'm directly on the job. But I rose to this gaudy fly. Suppose I *have* got an inferiority complex about not being a fighting man although if I were commissioned, very likely they'd put me into Public Relations or some such specialist line where I would probably see much less action than I expect to see as a correspondent. Still, when this old guy went on to recommend to me Shepheard's Hotel as "a jolly good spot to put up at," I answered with some asperity that I proposed to waste no time in Cairo but go straight into Tobruk. I ought to be ashamed of shooting such a line . . . But why is it never real fighting people who provoke one like this—only individuals who have never heard a shot fired in wrath ? \*

*June 26th.*—Brilliant hot day. Sea a cobalt blue. Flying fish skimming over the low waves like steeplechasers ; it's said they only break out of their element when pursued by larger game fish. How convenient if men could leap fifty feet through the air when pursued by an enemy ! We are now a trifle south of Bermuda and may touch at some port in Brazil. For the first time in my life I wash and iron a couple of shirts : laundering seems a relaxing, satisfying handicraft, but mine lacks that professional touch.

*June 30th.*—Engine trouble again. At night we halt for an hour, motionless in a flat sea, a few hundred miles off the mouth of the Amazon. A crescent moon, not a ripple on the water, nor—

\* Rather to my surprise, this line shot right home. My very first job *was* the siege of Tobruk.

a sound to break the immense stillness of the ocean except a hammering which comes up from the engine-room through the open skylights. Walking the deck, one might have been strolling on Southend Pier on a fine August night. The ship throws a great shadow on the water. We are a sitting target for any submarine.

*July 2nd.*—Cross the Line during the night. No little excitement when, by day, another ship passes within a few miles of us. We both take evasive action, exchange no signals.

*July 4th.*—Sight the mountains of Brazil at 8 a.m.—two little white mounds on the horizon. Log, 5700 miles. A Norwegian ship comes close to us and we sail along the Brazilian coast all day within sight of each other. An old American light cruiser sails close to us and signals for our identity. It's exciting to see land again just a month after leaving port. Days have succeeded each other with so gentle a rhythm it has seemed hard to believe the voyage would ever end. The ship's officers have been very secretive about our course. Amateur navigators among us have calculated our position very roughly but we were never sure of our destination. Two of the women passengers, having no head for geography, received a global shock this morning when they sighted land on the starboard side. They had assumed we were approaching the Cape along the coast of Africa, which would have been on the port side, so when they saw land they thought we must have overshot the mark and were now steaming northwards back to Capetown again ! They are very disappointed that there is still another fortnight's sailing ahead of us. I guess I would be, too, if I knew my wife were waiting for me when the ship docks.

*July 5th.*—Sail into Pernambuco about breakfast time. We keep running away from the bacon and eggs to take a look at the approaching shore line with its palm trees, bright yellow beaches and pink and pale blue stucco houses. It's a winter day in the tropics, with temperature about the same as summertime in Washington. That's to say, hot enough for any taste.

The harbour is artificial, and very narrow. Go ashore in a

bumboat after lunch with some of the Chinese stokers who are smart in blue serge suits and Trilby hats, each sporting a metal boutonnière depicting Chiang Kai-Shek.

I call on the British consul, send a cable home (at about seven shillings a word, it's the most expensive one I ever sent) and explore the city on foot. It's no use driving through a new town, if you want to get the 'feel' of it : I think one has to wander about the streets and take one's time. In the evening most of the passengers dine at the Grand Hotel, then go to the Cabaret Imperiale. How glorious to see all the lights ! But the Brazilians overdo the electricity, even for our starved tastes. The cabaret is as brightly lit as an operating theatre ; the hard unshaded glare is most unbecoming to the women. The orchestra is first-rate. Aggressively nationalistic, it plays nothing but congas and tangos and when we ask it to play an English or American tune, the leader declines—perhaps to show his country's aloofness from this " Imperialist war."

There are several parties of Germans in the place : they look very aloof, very self-confident. They do not, like some of our party, make the mistake of trying to induce strange Brazilians to drink to an Allied victory. And when a brawl seems imminent between some of the *Meliskerk* men and local people, the Germans withdraw to the bar. I am not in a drinking mood, which probably explains why I don't enjoy this bagarre. One of the South Africans, finding his small stock of Portuguese expanding gloriously under the stimulus of champagne, makes some disparaging remarks about the mixed racial origins of the Brazilian nation. From the nearby table someone gives him a push, he retaliates with a shove ; someone brandishes a plate, another a coffee-pot, and then a wine bottle comes sailing through the air. I push the two English girls under the table.

We are now being bombarded with oranges from several directions : this might pass for a carnivalesque, even hospitable, introduction to a great Brazilian product were it not for the fact that harder missiles follow after. One of the girls receives a coffee cup on the ear and I feel it is time to evacuate the wounded. One of the Dutch officers and I get the two girls out from under the table and rush them away to the exit whilst the rest of the party

get to closer grips with the enemy. The band stops playing, although it is supposed to be broadcasting 'live' on the radio at the moment and one of our party, conceiving this to be another considered insult, leaps on to the rostrum and proceeds to address the Brazilian nation over the microphone. The bandsmen struggle with him for possession of this instrument, what time he gives them a rendering of "There'll always be an England" in a voice of thunder. We go back to where our table had been (it is now overturned and serving as a barricade) and try to persuade the rest of our party to give up contributing to German propaganda by causing what the papers might term a "painful international incident," and come back to the ship. But they, enjoying themselves to the full extent of lung and muscle, are not having any. So we remove the women finally from the battlefield and leave them to it.

Back on the ship, the morning hours are made hideous by the whoopings of returning revellers: sailors are on duty down the ship's ladder to prevent them falling into the water, yet several get wet. Hiccuping and giggling, the Chinese stokers trip past to their quarters. The Pernambuco police arrive with the persons of three ringleaders snatched, they say, away from real mayhem at the hands of Imperiale patrons who, tiring of bottles, had begun to flourish knives. From the nonchalant manner in which the police hand back our three to the ship's officers, it would seem they are quite used to this sort of thing.

Dawn breaks early. A good time has been had by nearly all.

*July 6th.*—Can civilisation exist, can it really take hold, in any part of the earth so close to the equator? Closer inspection of Pernambuco gives one cause to doubt it. I took a tram out into the suburbs. The jungle is right at the city's back door. And given the slightest chance, its rapid growth begins to menace the very bricks and mortar. Beyond the walls which surround the finest villas a dense tangle of undergrowth and trees press in upon the well-kept gardens. A football field which appeared to have been played upon quite recently is becoming overgrown with huge weeds and creepers. The tramline comes to an abrupt stop at the end of a concrete road: beyond it is a narrow path into a

palm grove. And beyond that, jungle. Just jungle. Some of the palms are immense, like the giant red-woods of North America. The birds are gloriously coloured and of great size. Nature here seems noisy and excessive : man, in contrast, pale and impotent. He takes refuge in a style of dressing which attempts to match the tropical ebullience all about him but serves only to stress his own deficiencies. I used to shudder at the word 'dago' : it seemed so unnecessarily cruel. But now I see that some such word is necessary—nothing less will really do—to describe men who wear linen suits of magenta colour, or electric blue ; who wear snake-skin shoes and vermilion ties and yellow diamonds on their middle fingers : who carry white umbrellas and whose complexions vary from a pale Iberian to an African chocolate.

Few of the women seem to be of European blood, but many are very attractive in their vivid, hirsute way.

In the intervals of rainstorms which produce great humidity, a leaden sun beats down over all. A church which looks about three hundred years old, crumbling in the sun, is, I discover, a late Victorian production. The best hotel, entirely modern in the le Corbusier style, is already cracking and blistering in the heat. You can see that serious attempts have been made, in architecture, in the whole way of life, to produce a serene Latin civilisation : but the sun and the throttling vegetation bear down too heavily upon Pernambuco. The tropics are too strong for the Rue de la Paix.

*July 7th.*—Before dawn two small Brazilian liners enter the harbour. They are beautiful, with the lights blazing along their open decks built to sail only in warm seas, and their spacious yachtlike lines. What a contrast with the poor old *Meliskerk*, which has to sail through fog and ice as well as equatorial waters, and so is buttoned up like an old woman.

A large white plane of the German Condor airline circles over us at breakfast. Besides the Brazilian ships, three Italian freighters laid up by the blockade are the only other vessels in the harbour. It is fun to have a German plane flying over one, to see the black swastikas on it, yet know there is no prospect of any bombs coming down.

I talk with some Gobs off the two American destroyers and the old cruiser we saw outside the harbour, which are doing a "Neutrality patrol" in these waters. The sailors tell me they are sailing just ahead of us and will "lend a hand" in case of trouble. This American patrol is, of course, virtually an allied patrol. The information it picks up is available to the Allies. (N.B.—This was just five months before Pearl Harbour.)

The Gobs are extremely polite and quite diffident about their rôle in this war. Plainly, they don't like it at all. They've seen so much more than the Isolationist landsmen in the Middle West (although many of the sailors actually come from there) that they have no patience left for the Isolationist case. They want to be in the war "shooting" and most of them are convinced it won't be long before this happens. But navymen of course are usually ahead of public opinion ashore, in any country. I met plenty of Americans in London before I left who still advocated "keeping out." There was even that newspaper man who went back to Washington at the height of the London blitz, complaining bitterly that the food was bad, that he'd had enough of what he somewhat erroneously called "active service," that he wanted to get married and settle down.

I spent five years in America as a Washington correspondent, right up to the outbreak of the war and I have an American grandmother. I think I know something about how they feel. And for the life of me I can't see enough congressmen getting together to vote America into the war no matter how tough things get—unless America is actually attacked herself. As one who hated Munich and despised our own Appeasers, I cannot feel that America's present policy is a glorious one, nor that it serves her own interests. Half in and half out of the war—who knows where she really stands? And much as I admire F.D.R. and his attitude all along, he ought never to have lent himself to the coinage of that cowardly phrase—"A shooting war"—which implies the possibility of a nation waging an unspecified kind of war *without* the painful obligation of firing a shot. What kind of a war would *that* be? The sort which Mussolini fought from September, 1939 until June, 1940? A shameful policy, unworthy of any great nation.

We sail before noon, the American warships preceding us. So much a part of the language have those "Traveltalks" put out by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer become that every one, seeing the golden coastline fade away, walks around greeting other passengers with the pathetic catchline, "And so we say farewell to Recife ! colourful entrepôt of the Tropics !"

*July 11th.*—For four days now we've streaked along over a glassy sea. Is this what they call the Doldrums ? There is certainly a lot of weed floating about—the sort of stuff in which wind-jammers used to get becalmed after rounding the Horn in the brave *Boy's Own Paper* days of my youth.

See the moon rise over the sea. She comes up almost pink, with pitch-black clouds behind her. A gorgeous but improbable sight. Even in a *gouache* of Frances Hodgkins, you would not believe it. There is bad weather coming. But the sky is clear yet. The 'Southern Cross' is brilliant to-night.

*July 12th.*—What a wonderful bird is the albatross ! The crime of the Ancient Mariner seems to us heinous, unexpiated even to this day, as we watch four of them planing over the stern of the ship, coasting after us all day long with scarcely a movement of their wings. The seagull is a raucous, vulgar bird with a greedy expression : the albatross is altogether on a higher plane—and not only physically. It has a serene expression, a very dignified and independent bird. It ignores the Mother Carey's chickens flying behind. It is a white eagle of the Ocean, a worthy inspirer of legend.

*July 13th.*—Heavy seas and violent rolling. Most of the passengers are knocked out. An uncomfortable day—you cannot write and it's hard to read : you cannot walk about without holding on for support. I feel slightly giddy at times but must be a genuine sailor, for I don't feel sick.

*July 18th.*—For the last four days we've passed through very heavy weather, wet and squally. Life on board almost came to a standstill. You had to concentrate all the while on holding on, on



wedging yourself into a chair and your chair into a corner to prevent yourself being hurled about the smoking-room.

Now it's a bit clearer. There's a big swell caused, they say, by the Cape Rollers, which roll up from the south. But we are heading straight into them, so it's not so bad. In the evening the captain has his farewell dinner in pre-war Dutch style : menu and wines excellent, including Veuve Clicquot. We are up singing and dancing until 3 a.m. despite the lurching of the ship.

*July 20th.*—Up before daybreak. Here at last are the lights of Capetown—line upon line of fireflies strung across the black mass of Table Mountain. Our voyage of 10,000 miles is ended after nearly seven weeks at sea. How strong is your nostalgia for an old tub after you've been on her so long ? It's been a good voyage, the best travel value I've ever encountered, for it cost me rather less than for a comparable holiday period in some stodgy hotel at Torquay. Just forty pounds.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### CAPE TO CAIRO

I SHALL SAY very little about South Africa. Not because there is not a great deal to say ; for the Union is really one of those countries about which one *could* write a book after only a ten-day visit—a political book, of course, pretty bitter in tone. But there is so much ahead of me I cannot linger longer over Capetown, Johannesburg, Pretoria or Durban on this page than I lingered in fact, which was a very short time indeed.

The first thing that strikes you is that in this enormous and beautiful country, with its great mineral wealth, there are only two million white people, but nine million blacks. From that basic fact, it seems to me, everything else about South Africa proceeds. You get a quite Irish preoccupation with politics, a high standard of living among most of the whites, plenty of good cheap food and wine and tobacco and a splendid climate. You have factors which ought to, and in some sections actually do, produce a race of supermen : but alongside that you find a racial and religious intolerance more bitter than in most other non-fascist countries ; you find the Cecil Rhodes kind of Imperialism, which looks forward to a White African Empire, based on the vast wealth of the Rand, as one of the prizes to be won in this war—you find that running alongside the old Boer ideal of the patriarchal farmer, with plentiful cheap labour, sitting on his stoep with Bible and brandy-bottle to hand and bridling the power of the miners and speculators through his rural Republican vote and his stern, puritanical church organisation.

At first sight, South Africa seems to be the most wonderful place in the world in which to settle. Thousands of British soldiers off the convoys going north have been so entranced by the hospitality and spacious living in Capetown and Durban that they have sworn to return to live after the war. But, on second thoughts, the vista's not quite so attractive. There seems to be

rather too much big talk, too many grandiloquent plans for "expansion" of territory to suit a young nation with such a tiny population. And on the other hand, the diehard Afrikaans ideal of excluding fresh settlers altogether so as to keep up a "white man's standard of living" among the few already there smacks too much of race suicide, even plain degeneracy. The country is obviously too rich and huge to be maintained as an exclusive club for Afrikaners, or for Englishmen either. And in social policy, because of the black majority, nothing has been settled. Compared with the social stability that has already been achieved in New Zealand or Australia, South Africa must be regarded as a backward country. Its wealth is in far too few hands.

Nevertheless, its hard blue skies and great open spaces are mightily attractive. You gain the impression that here is enough land for every man to have a hundred acres and a whole herd of cows.

I drove around the Cape peninsula and was delighted by the Dutch colonial manor houses nestling among their parks and vineyards. Groote Constantia reminds one of a manor house in Virginia—its patriarchal way of living, based on cheap if not slave labour, very much the same. And Cecil Rhodes's Groote Schuur is charming too—a small house for a very rich man, but correspondingly rich in taste. We drove back through Muizenberg and Fischhoek around the tip of the peninsula where the waters of the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean meet. The road is like the Upper Corniche on the Riviera, winding along the side of the mountain with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet down into the sea. We disturbed a baboon by the roadside : he scampered away up the mountain in great leaps.

The 36-hour train journey to Johannesburg is wearisome except for those who have already acquired the taste for the dry African uplands, with nothing to look at except some mountains in the far distance which scarce shift their position hour after hour.

The Karroo is supposed to be a desert whilst the Veld, to which it gives place after several hundred miles, is not : but for the life of me I could not tell the difference between one and the other. A few weeks later, however, I was to understand why the South African troops in the Libyan desert acclimatised themselves

so easily to their surroundings. The "Blue" up North is so like the Karoo at home.

People in Cape Colony had warned me that Johannesburg was a vulgar, money-grubbing place, with no soul. But I was fascinated by the city. Johannesburg has some first-rate skyscrapers—especially the Anstey and Manners buildings—and its air, at 6000 feet, is superb. The sky is a pale frost-blue, the sun is hot, the atmosphere crackles with electricity. I doubt whether there is a town in the United States so well-designed or with so many modern buildings. Johannesburg is only 50 years old and has been built up from a village of tents on the open veld into the second largest city of Africa (after Cairo) within the lifetimes of many of its present inhabitants. Jo'burg shows everywhere the evidence of vast wealth and of no little sophistication: there are excellent restaurants, clubs and hotels, fine parks and—as in some American towns—the suburbs are the finest parts of the city instead of being the dreariest, as in English towns.

Every enemy of the 'quaint' and deliberately 'olde worlde,' every one who likes clean concrete, good lighting and plumbing, and smokeless air, every one who likes a new city to be twentieth-century, without any shamefaced apeing of the past—ought to go to Johannesburg. I think it is the only completely modern city of its size in the whole world.

I went to Pretoria which looks very much as Washington once looked, before it lost its provincial air, and I admired the site of the parliament buildings but not the meaningless pile of brick which Baker erected on it. When Baker and Lutyens collaborated on New Delhi, they produced something monumental and exotic. But here Baker seems to have been content to put up a sort of overgrown cottage hospital. One day, if the Rhodes-ites get their way, Pretoria will be the capital of a great African nation stretching from the Cape to the sources of the Nile, at which time I dare say it will be 'made over' to suit its new status. To-day, the masses of jacaranda trees, the wooded hillsides and the trim civil-servants' villas among them probably represent a fair norm for a very small nation with very great responsibilities which hasn't yet made up its mind what in the world it's going to do about them.

Club life in South Africa is well developed and I was most

hospitably entertained at the Civil Service Club in Capetown, at the Rand Club in Johannesburg and at the Pretoria Club by Jimmy Dunn, a great figure in South African journalism and by the general manager and the editor of the South African Press Association, Arthur Horne and Tommy Frew. Among the interesting people they introduced me to was Senator Hartog, in charge of the government's war-time publicity, who, very suitably for his present job, was born of Jewish parents in Germany.

The dawn was breaking as the Imperial Airways flying-boat circled over Durban harbour to gain height and, looking down, I saw the familiar shape of the S.S. *Meliskerk*, now at the end of her long voyage, lying on the mist-covered water below me.

These old Empire flying-boats have now been surpassed by the Boeing Clippers. But I know of no more comfortable means of travel, even now that they have been stripped down for war-time use and with many of their conveniences removed.

We followed the coastline all morning and came down at Beira, in Mozambique, at lunch-time, after doing 780 miles. Then for the next hundred miles we flew very low over the beaches. Skimming along over the sand, only 15 to 20 feet up, gives one the impression of being in an enormously fast express train, doing 140 miles an hour, along a seacoast. The oddest sensation I've yet had in the air. We nearly skim the heads off black boys walking along the beach and put the fear of God into a few who are bathing. Old fishermen casting their nets into the surf fall on their backs when, with little preliminary whirring, we round a promontory and are upon them before they know what is happening. To these simple people we must appear like some awful, monstrous bird. It's rather naughty of the pilot to play this game with them.

At 3 p.m. we climb to 8000 feet to get above cloud and, when this clears, we fly over land, seeing innumerable bush and forest fires glowing with a red flame. One wonders what form of spontaneous combustion sets all these isolated beacons burning.

At 4.30 p.m. we begin losing height for Mozambique. You can see the town on its island but we are circling over an anchorage close to the mainland, on which there is a good modern hotel run

by the Portuguese Government solely for the use of the air passengers. From 100 feet over the clear water I can see a large shark idling in the river. He looks quite red in the greenish water—must be some effect of the evening light.

The next morning we are up in the dark at half-past three. Yesterday it was 4 a.m. These lobster-trick starts are the curse of long-distance flying, only to be obviated by flying at night, as with the American Clippers. One does spend so much time in hotel bedrooms and in waiting at embarkation piers which could be better spent in motion. After all, the advantage of a ship that flies should be that it is self-contained in both elements: long periods ashore ought not to be a part of its voyages at all.

Just after the take-off, which is made along an illuminated runway on the water, we rise to 5000 feet and see the sun rise over Africa. And how verdant are the green hills of Africa! It looks cool and pleasant down there: one cannot imagine how this can be a country of dangerous beasts, insects and fevers. No place could look more welcoming to the white man. On the one hand, the rolling forest lands, on the other the bright blue ocean.

We reach Lindi in Tanganyika—our first stop in British territory—just before breakfast. We've done 350 miles since it got light.

You feel that you can see miles down into the pellucid water. It's fascinating to see young islands growing in the sea, some approaching maturity under the water, others still infantile. Some look like large joints of red meat. Others have entered their majority as genuine, small atolls, and have already grown rocks and vegetation and a sandy beach. The fascination of islands is certainly not an anti-social part of the possessive instinct. Almost every one would like to own *one* of these, but who would want more? Island-lovers are monogamous. They love only one atoll at a time. The essence of the passion is to stand alone on your own sand-castle. To be king of several islands is not only greedy, it is positively less attractive than to be the sovereign of only one.

The next stop is Dar-es-Salaam. I don't wonder the Germans were proud of this little harbour town when they had Tanganyika. It is far superior to the other mid-African towns I've been through.

There are no tin shanties here but, ranged around the lake-like anchorage, well-built villas, two churches (Lutheran and Catholic) in the trim style of North Germany, shaded roads and pretty gardens. The town's red brick and pink tiling is embowered in woods and palm groves of the most luxuriant green. If this were the whole story of German colonisation we would have to admit its worth. But the seafront of Dar-es-Salaam no more represents the depths of Tanganyika, of course, than Brighton's regency squares represent industrial England.

We came down over Mombasa at noon. Here a couple of warships are the first reminders of war in many hundreds of miles. This port is not so attractive as Dar-es-Salaam but looks much busier. The Kenya countryside is even greener than Tanganyika : it is well wooded and, in places, quite European-looking.

We go ashore in the Airways launch but stay only long enough to unload some Ministry of Supply business men and take on in exchange, some young officers in very fancy East African uniforms with feathers in their hats. One of them asks me " the latest news from Quag's " and whether the 400 Club is still open : his extensive knowledge of London night clubs proclaims him to be one of these Kenya exquisites who are at great pains not to become mere African settlers, but try to keep up with the mode at home. There are many things I would like to ask this officer, were politeness not all. I suspect he came to Kenya " because you can still lead the life of a gentleman there " ; perhaps (damn it all) " because England is no longer a white man's country, don't you know." But maybe his motives were more admirable. I shall never know.

We climb fast as we circle over Mombasa. The express train on its way to Nairobi soon looks no larger than a worm. Ahead of us lies 430 miles of upland and mountain with hardly a puddle of water for a flying-boat to land on. But they do say that these boats have landed on dry land on their bellies before now and that cannot be worse than an emergency descent in a land plane when the undercarriage does not function. We are heading for Lake Victoria Nyanza and have set a straight course for Kisumu which will take us past Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in

Africa. Nairobi will go by some miles to starboard—too far away to see.

We are now on a level with the lower mountains of Kenya. The sky is murky with a high wind and the aircraft is bumping heavily. While this is going on, we have a cold lunch. We enjoy the hot coffee that comes with it, for it's mighty cold now.

This part of Kenya reminds me of Spain in its bronze barrenness. But it's not very wild or 'African,' as one might have expected. Soon we come to jungly uplands; country with deep valleys and rounded hills of the most beautiful rich, damp green, and very satisfying to look at. Some valleys have a park-like aspect, where the trees have been cleared, especially.

More thick jungle. Then comes a break with coffee plantations and settlers' homes—red-roofed, with outhouses and stables and tennis-courts. I now believe the stories one hears that Kenya settlers are able to lead that comfortable, manorial sort of existence which has disappeared almost completely from the Western world.

We're still climbing. The cows in the pastures look like little white ants. Here are clusters of native kraals. And one straw hut, isolated, is on fire and burning brightly. No doubt a greater domestic tragedy here for some black man than the burning of the Crystal Palace was for all South London.

Kilimanjaro has disappointed us by remaining wrapt in its mists. Apparently it usually lets down the traveller in this way. At a quarter to four we sight Lake Victoria Nyanza and our long excursion over land, which does not seem to be the right element for our flying hull, is over. We come down among great bulrushes on this rippling inland sea. We are plumb on the equator line but because of the altitude, it's pleasantly cool. We go ashore for a cup of tea during the half-hour in which the boat is refuelling. We are now entering the war zone governed by G.H.Q. Middle East, for a general gets aboard bound for Cairo and two staff officers with maps and reports on the East African campaign.

We quickly do the 146 miles across the northern fringe of the lake and land just one hour later in Uganda, at Port Bell, a whistle stop on the water's edge, the port for Kampala. It's getting dusk as we get into a line of cars and drive seven miles



into Kampala. The road is excellent, the country lush and juicy after rain. The natives jogging along the road look plump and well-nourished : some ride bicycles and wear bowler hats. The approaches to Kampala are as snug and homely as Torquay — palm-trees, neat gardens and all !

The Imperial Hotel is excellent, with private baths and decorations indistinguishable from any modern hotel in London. All that reminds you of Africa is the mosquito netting and the presence in the lounge of tweedy-looking English ladies nursing whiskies and sodas and uttering shrill, bird-like cries of pleasure as Alvar Liddell gives them the day's radio news from London.

Next morning it's up again before dawn and a cold drive down to the lakeside. White carpets of mist are spread over the lake and over the country for miles around as we leave the water at 7 o'clock. An hour later we pass over the Victoria Nile, with Murchison Falls cascading inconspicuously to our left (I've seen Niagara Falls from the air, too, and they were equally disappointing). To appreciate a waterfall, one needs to be right underneath it. Shortly after we see the loop of a river. It is the Bahr-el-Jebel, as the upper reaches of the White Nile are called, and in passing over it we enter the Sudan.

Two and a half hours after our take-off we circle over what seems a tiny stream, at first no broader than the Windrush, next moment no larger than the Thames, which turns out to be the Nile at Juba, and we come down upon it with a rush which sends huge waves smacking against its banks. Here we get our first whiff of heat. Naked bush niggers stand on the bank, amazingly skinny. They watch us unconcernedly. We go ashore and walk about on the banks of the Nile. The riverain lands are covered in tall reeds and are very flat ; except for the blistering sun, the country looks pastoral, quite European. Again, I am struck to see how un-African (judged by one's schoolboy and later reading) much of Africa seems to be. Not Dark Continent at all. Just ordinary green country, with the same trees and hills one sees at home.

We put in another two hours aloft before descending on the Nile again at Malakal, 120 miles from the Abyssinian border. Here the Nile, which is going to be our lifeline ribboning along

beneath our prow for the next 2000 miles all the way up to the Mediteranean, is a light chocolate colour. The Sudan hereabouts is an immense green billiard table, pocked with scrub here and there.

Approaching Malakal at a considerable height, the river looked much too narrow to land on ; it seemed foolhardy to try to alight accurately on this trickle of water ! But then, planing low, you are reassured to see that here it is as majestic as the Thames at Westminster Bridge.

In the afternoon, as we are nearing Khartoum, the desert begins to grow. Slowly the green country falls behind, with still a verdant patch left here and there, until at last all is yellow below, with only the tiny grey-blue trace of the river left to carry a vein of life through the dead lands all around.

Khartoum looks a mere village at the place where the two great Niles meet. We come in at about ten thousand feet, where it's quite cold, but when we step out of the cabin into the motor-launch the heat rises up off the water and strikes a blow that nearly knocks us over. To-day is the first of August. It is 110 degrees in the shade. And Heaven knows what in the sun. Covering the hundred yards from the launch to the waiting car, the sun falls upon one's back like the flame of a blow-torch. Never have I felt such heat. I believe if someone were to plaster a raw egg on my shoulder it would fry before I reach that car. A naval officer's wife who is one of the passengers becomes faint from the sudden transition from ice-box to oven and has to be helped into the car. Someone gets a damp handkerchief to put around her head.

Foolishly, we open all the car's windows for the short, dusty ride into Khartoum, and as a result the car is soon filled with ovenlike blasts of air which blow straight off the desert.

The hotel on the banks of the Blue Nile, outwardly cool in its gardens, actually gives us no respite, for we are given rooms in an annexe which must have represented the idea of some Victorian architect in far-off England of what a tropical building ought to be : it has tiny windows, low ceilings and although we keep the fans whirring all night the temperature remains around 100 and the atmosphere maintains the consistency of warm potato soup.

A familiar figure sat sipping a drink on the terrace. In one of those "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" encounters which do not seem real even while one is experiencing them, I shook hands with Martin Herlihy, general manager of Reuters in Egypt, with whom I was going to work. He had been on a 'business trip' into Eritrea and was waiting in Khartoum for a train. He had no idea I was on my way from home, murmuring vaguely, "Let's see, weren't you torpedoed somewhere off Brazil?" and I realised that the harmless meanderings of the *Meliskerk* in the South Atlantic must have given rise to all sorts of gossip among correspondents, who alone move comparatively freely in war-time from capital to capital, scattering the seed of *faits divers*, like frolic winds, upon a world parched by censorship.

So I dined with Herlihy and some 'Bimbashis'—which is the name given to almost every white official in the Sudan. The Sudan Civil Service maintains its reputation for intelligence and enlightenment (how much of this is due, I wonder, to the fact that it's within close reach of London on an excellent air route?) and the conversation was as buoyant as the dinner was heavy. The Bimbashis wore a comfortable sort of aertex evening dress: from them I first learned of the *faux pas* one can commit by appearing in the wrong kind of dinner suit in different parts of the Tropics. In some Imperial Outposts, it seems, they wear a black coat and white trousers, in others, white coat and black trousers; the waiters in these respective areas wear the opposite combination of the checker-board to that affected by the Sahibs, so that if one wants to avoid a tip or an insult, one must study local form in advance.

Eviscerated like Toast Melba after a grilling night, we clambered into the flying-boat again at 6.45 a.m. and were stewed inside the hull for half an hour while the engineers fiddled with the engines. The take-off, followed by a rapid soaring to 10,000 feet, was a vast relief. Soon we rejoiced to feel cold again.

The last thousand miles passed very rapidly. Always the landscape was identical: one nodded and dozed over the monotony of watching that endless ribbon of river stretching over the dirty-yellow wastes of sand. At Wadi-Halfa I saw my first desert aerodrome, zigzagged around with slit-trenches and

camouflaged bays for parking aircraft, and with Gloucester Gladiator biplanes, the fighters which beat the Italian Air Force in Wavell's campaign, then repeated the trick in East Africa, parked on the sand. Not an important aerodrome, evidently. Hurricanes were now the thing in the Western Desert, with Spitfires coming in in small numbers.

We looked out for the Valley of the Kings at Luxor but detected only two monstrous hotels, and dahabyahs sailing on the river.

This, then, was Egypt—seven hundred miles of sand with that tiny rivulet carrying life through it, spreading it sparsely on either side in green cultivated patches often only a few hundred yards wide, rarely more than a mile or two. The Egypt you see on the map is meaningless. Nobody but a few Bedouin and their camels ever enters the desert. Sixteen million people are crammed into this narrow green strip and the fan-shaped delta—a country shaped like a cobra, even more of a geographical monstrosity than Chile.

And now we can see the ruins of Memphis and the Step Pyramid, the oldest of all : followed by a brief flash at the Sphinx and the pyramids of Gizeh, which look enormous in the brassy air of early afternoon. And here beneath us is Cairo, the largest city in Africa—a race-course, what looks like a country-club with people splashing in a swimming pool, tall concrete buildings and streets jammed with motor-cars and away to the right, the bare cliffs of al Mokattam and the great mosque perched half-way up them.

The sky over the city is filled with wheeling hawks who flap lazily out of the way of our boat. When we descend for the last time on the Nile, my journey of 16,000 miles over, the first sound that breaks the stillness after the engines are shut off is the screeching and mewling of these hawks. Theirs were the first voices I heard in Cairo—and the last.

In the two years that were to follow, I grew to love Cairo. It became another home. But at first I hated it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INSIDE BESIEGED TOBRUK

THEY called it an hotel but, like many a Greek pension in Alexandria, it was in fact merely one floor of a largish house. Above and below it were other tiny hotels of the same kind, so that the outside of the building bore a bewildering number of *affiches* in which "Ritz" and "Carlton" seemed the favourite (and how incongruous!) evocations of the patron saints of all hoteliers.

Vanderson, the official British War Office photographer, and I were shown into an enormous room with five beds in it. I believe it was the only empty room in all Alexandria that night so we were glad to pay for all five at the rate of about three and sixpence a bed. We were expecting Harold Denny of the *New York Times* to join us and we knew him to be an expansive fellow who loved to travel heavy and who would probably be glad of extra space for his paraphernalia. The hotelier, however, had other ideas. Two gentlemen, with five beds between them, suggested to his mind only one consummation. Winking and smiling, he intimated that so much space afforded unusual opportunities for pleasant companionship in the securing of which, he Themistocles Papanastasiou, would be glad to offer his best services.

Good fellow and good ally, he was only trying to serve us as best he could, according to his lights, so that it is with an apology to you, Themistocles, that I repeat the well-worn catch which every Allied officer who has passed through Alexandria in this war has doubtless heard :

"Un Anglais—un whisky-soda : deux Anglais—un Club."

"Un Francais—un repas : deux Francais, une affaire."

"Un Allemand—un Emmerdeur : deux allemands—une guerre."

“Un Grec—un maquerau : deux Grecs—deux Maqueraux : trois Grecs—*trois Maqueraux* !”

The sort of companions whom we did *not* desire Themistocles to furnish us with being of that unpleasant species which habitually lurks in the bedding of small hotels in Egypt, we set to work with the Flit gun as soon as the landlord had gone and got things shipshape for the night. Denny did not arrive. (The next time he went to the desert, poor man, he was captured and spent many months in an Axis jail before the happy technicality that America had not been at war at the time he was taken prisoner secured his release.)

Next morning we were called before dawn and, bundling our bedrolls and bags into a taxi, drove down to the docks. It was quite obvious where we were going. The greatest danger of the Tobruk run from the navy's point of view was that the departure of ships from Alexandria could not possibly be concealed from the eyes of the swarming Fifth Column in the city. All one had to do was to stroll along the sea wall at Mex and watch the ships leave harbour, a few cables' length away. If they were packed with troops (as they were on this particular morning) then they must inevitably be bound for Tobruk. No warship would need to go to Haifa or through the Canal with troops on board.

We had been told to report at pier number 6 and as we drove in through the dock gates we saw a long column of troops marching towards us, looking like a small expeditionary force. Indeed it was. This was the Polish Brigade going up to Tobruk to relieve men of the garrison who had already been there for five months.

No secrecy was possible over a movement of troops so large as this. The sun was now up and crowds of Egyptians, attracted by the passage of the marching columns, ran out of their houses to see them go by. Their cap badges, and their chattered Polish as they swung past, marching at ease, told the whole world who they were. I reflected that if there were so much as one secret radio transmitter in Alexandria it could be counted upon to tell the enemy this important news in time for them to have a reception

committee of aircraft or surface ships waiting for us by the time we got to enemy-held coastline at Sollum. And that was about eight hours steaming from here.

We embarked on H.M.S. *Latonia*, a brand-new mine-layer. She looked more like a cruiser and had a wonderful turn of speed—38 knots—the idea being that to lay mines close in in enemy waters in these days one needs a high turn of speed, even at night, to enable one to get out of reach of shore-based aircraft before morning.

A wise provision, but it did not save the *Latonia*. She ran back and forth regularly to Tobruk—a run more dangerous than any mine-laying operation—and she paid the price of this regularity, a month or two later, by being sunk by a torpedo. The defence perimeter of Tobruk was about thirty miles long but from the sea the fortress presented a strip of coastline merely ten miles broad so that an incoming vessel, aiming at the harbour mouth in the centre of this strip, was only five miles from the nearest piece of enemy-held coast as she approached. And enemy aircraft could take off from el Adem airfield, just outside the fortress, so that in addition to the hazards of the land you felt you were steaming straight towards an enemy aerodrome as you sailed into Tobruk. And that is precisely what you were doing.

To this day I have not got over my astonishment that it should have been possible for British warships to sail in and out of Tobruk night after night and not pay the penalty each time ! When the moon was up, no ship entered or left, but on every moonless night one or two destroyers crept in, remained in the harbour some two hours unloading, then taking on wounded to be evacuated, and sailed out again, racing to get opposite the coast of Egypt with its desert airfields whence fighter protection could be given, before dawn broke.

Five hundred Polish troops are allotted to *Latonia*. We park our belongings with the Polish officers in a corner of the tiny ward-room, then climb on deck to stake out a corner for ourselves. Almost every inch of space is already occupied. Men lie down on top of their kit as soon as they come aboard. It's difficult to walk about. Some men have brought their dogs with them. One sergeant has a violin. It seems he taught at the Warsaw Con-

servatoire before 1939 and is going to organise an orchestra among the troops when he gets to Tobruk.

One Pole in particular catches my eye. He recalls one of those pictures of Napoleon's "Old Guard." He has an enormous moustache, the ends of which are visible on each side of his cheek when you look at him from behind ; his hair is *en brosse* ; he is about six foot six—a sergeant ; he is whittling the figure of a Polish cavalryman out of a block of wood with a huge knife, also used as a cut-all in dealing with his food. A real old cavalryman, I should say. He looks out of place speeding into the desert on this fast warship, to wage a war of tommy-guns and aeroplanes.

Some of these Poles are *old* types—peasants attuned to the rhythm of horses and rifle fire. Parallel with them, of course, you have first-rate Polish fighter pilots and excellent technicians. Yet in a peasant nation like this they must be comparatively rare. These Poles are splendid fellows yet, looking at them, I feel how much better it would have been, both from the ideological and technical side of this war, if we could have entered the struggle not upon the issue of Poland but when Czechoslovakia was invaded. How vast a difference was there between the government of Benes and that of Beck and Smigly-Ridz ! You may say, the poor Poles did not deserve their reactionary government of 1939 which not only intrigued with Germany against the Soviet Union up to the last moment but also fed General Ironside full of all sorts of Polish fairy tales when he went to Warsaw to co-ordinate staff plans just before the storm broke. Maybe it is not for the British, who were unable to shake free of our Chamberlain government until much later, to cast a stone. Yet, government for government, and issue for issue, Czechoslovakia was surely a more clear-cut, a more perfect *casus belli* than Poland.

Still, here we have some four thousand Poles being carried in six ships of the British Navy into the hell-hole of Tobruk to bleed and die there for the common cause whilst the flower of the well-mechanised, far more modern Czech Army has not only never had a chance to fight but has been forced these past two years to make arms for Germany in the same factories which could have made arms for us.

The sun is high and the day bright as we sail out of Alexandria



—three destroyers besides *Latonia* and two cruisers of the *Ajax* class. *Latonia* is not making full speed, since we are much faster than the cruisers, but at about 30 knots we are certainly the fastest convoy I have ever been in. Half an hour later, some fighters appear very high overhead, fifteen of them, and ‘action stations’ are ordered, but the intruders turn out to be British. Relays of squadrons like these protect us all the way up the coast, which remains in sight all day. The cost of this continual air umbrella in flying hours alone impresses one. Any aero engine after 60 hours flying-time is reckoned to be written off in the desert. It has to be completely taken down, cleaned of sand and grit and reassembled. Yet every convoy into Tobruk has to receive air protection on this scale.

We lie on deck most of the day in the sun, receiving a welcome salt shower every quarter of an hour when the convoy sharply alters course and our vessel heels over at an acute angle.

We get an excellent lunch in ‘relays’ in the ward-room and are told to make the most of it, particularly the gin and beer, which do not exist in Tobruk. I am taken with the demcanour of the ship’s doctor and the paymaster-lieutenant, both “Wavy Navy” men, who are frank to admit that they have been in the service only a few months and know next to nothing of the sea.

“I feel damnably sick in the slightest seaway,” the doctor confesses. “They tell me I’ll get used to it, but I don’t see why I ever should. Nelson never did.”

“I suppose it’s meant to be good for morale, but it seems a bit ‘ard to me that the officers’ quarters should be the most dangerous part of the ship during action,” says the paymaster. He warns me not to stay in the wardroom in an action and shows me how the main hoist from the magazine passes through an aperture right outside the wardroom door.

Neither of these men have anything ‘nautical’ about them, There’s something refreshing about this attitude of: “We’ve been called up like every one else and we happen to be in the navy, but for Gawd’s sake, don’t mistake us for sailors!”

I hope they both emerged safe ‘out of the drink’ when this ship went down.

In the middle of lunch, ‘action stations’ sounds and we run

up the iron ladders on to the deck, thrusting on tin hats and inflating 'Mae West' life-jackets as we wait our turn in the upward scramble.

It's only a practice turn-out but the ack-ack gunners fire some rounds to keep their hands in. Then we are allowed to relax.

It is still light when the captain, who has invited me on his bridge, points to a dark-brown hill on the port quarter and says, "There's Sollum. Beginning of enemy territory."

I should say we are not more than five miles off. From Sollum barracks atop that hill they must be able to see us as clear as we can see them. Our fighter cover, right now, seems to be taking a holiday. But the captain seems not to worry. He has done this trip half a dozen times before.

Darkness comes down as Bardia falls away behind us. You can see the lingering last light catching the white houses on top of the cliff. There is an Italian garrison up there and down below, in the narrow harbour hidden between the towering brown cliffs, there is, so they say, a U-boat base.

It is extraordinary to pass so near the enemy as this, yet not to feel his power. Our gunners stand by constantly from now on and the convoy changes course more frequently than before, but these are the only precautions we take—the only ones we *can* take. The R.A.F. cannot give us protection now—we are too far past the last forward landing ground in the desert.

There is no moon fortunately—or we should not be making this trip—and we rush on through the night at top speed, each ship throwing up a bow wave that shines through the dark and, leaving a phosphorescent wake so bright, that for a moment you forget there is no moon and take these bright streaks for the reflection of the moon upon the water.

The captain tells me that the enemy aircraft seem to be undecided between two sets of tactics to be pursued against the Tobruk supply ships.

"Sometimes," he says, "they let you go into the harbour unopposed and come over and bomb you while you're unloading. At other times, they leave you alone in the harbour and concentrate on bombing your wake, which shows up on the darkest night as you can see, while you are steaming for home."

But to-night we were lucky enough to be left alone on both counts.

Just before eleven the ship slackens speed and a faint white light appears ahead—the buoy marking the entrance to Tobruk harbour.

*Latonia* goes in first, the two cruisers standing off some way outside. We slip noiselessly down the channel past the hulks of sunken ships of which there were at this time about forty in the harbour—many of them not visible even by day. There is no pilot, of course. Each ship must know how to pick its way between the wrecks unaided and I wonder what would happen if a vessel was sunk in the fairway just before we got in, before we could be told of its location.

Every one is standing ready on deck, eager to get ashore and talking in whispers as they get their kit together. Even though the enemy is five miles away, some instinct makes you lower your voice.

The anchor goes down with a rattle that sounds indecently loud. Then silence falls again until you hear the 'phut-phut' of a boat approaching from the shore. It turns out to be a tank-landing barge.

On most nights, every man on this ship would be working like a demon unloading a deck cargo of food, petrol and ammunition of some 200 tons but to-night, apart from the 500 soldiers and some ammunition, there has been no room for a load and the crew have nothing to do except to drape a big rope net over the side and encourage diffident soldiers, burdened with equipment up to the eyelids, to entrust themselves to it and slide down over the slippery sides of the ship into the barge below.

I see my bedroll dropped twenty feet into the boat without alarm because I have transferred three precious bottles of whisky into my small bag which the doctor lowers lovingly over the side at the end of a rope, while I go down with one hand on the ladder and the other clutching my typewriter.

It takes about half an hour to get the barge packed with troops. And I mean *packed*. We are jammed so tightly together we cannot shift a shoulder, for each is interlocked in the chest of another man.

It is August 24th, 1941, and intensely hot. By the time the

boat has got to the shore and decanted us on to a wooden jetty on which a couple of military policemen are stationed to prevent newcomers ashore from falling into the water with loud whispers of "Mind that bomb 'ole, sir . . . an' step wide of this one 'ere," we are covered in sweat and our clothing sticks stiffly to our bodies.

A line of trucks awaits the Poles and they are soon disposed of, but I find that nobody cares about Vanderson or me. We stand a bit forlornly in the doorway of a white cottage with a great hole in one wall and another in its thin ceiling through which one can see the night sky, waiting for a problematical lorry which may, or may not, be able to drive us four miles up to the Wadi Auda, the transit camp where stray war correspondents are accommodated.

While we are waiting an aeroplane "stooges around" very high overhead and I look vainly around for possible shelter until the clerk on duty tells me, "It's only a Recce.—we don't take no notice of him." And, sure enough, no anti-aircraft gun in this great fortress of Ack-Ack (for at this time Tobruk's guns surpassed those of Malta for concentrated numbers and fire-power) bothered to get his range.

A couple of hours go by whilst we sit there on our bedrolls. I've been told all about the silent, waiting lassitude of soldiers and I fall into the mood very easily. You shut up your mind like a clam and think of nothing, just nothing. We can hear the other destroyers unloading, then the sound of *Latonia's* anchor coming up and the quiet beat of her engines as she puts out to sea again. At last, at half-past two in the morning, a truck rolls up out of the pitch dark and a voice asks if there's any one here for the transit camp.

We climb in and drive for about half an hour at an average speed of some two miles an hour, away off the road to the westward, over rough stones and stretches of solid rock. Of course we do not show a pinprick of light.

No car in Tobruk is allowed to keep its headlights.

The driver keeps losing his way and has to jump out with a torch shaded in his hand to look for some wheeltrack, some sign to show him the direction. Once, although he is quite furtive in using his illuminant, a voice which seems to come quite near from

some hole in the ground where a soldier is presumably sleeping, cries out, "Put that bloody light out," and the driver at once obeys.

"Orstrilians about 'ere," he says shortly. "They don't tell you twice."

I naively ask him what the next Australian sanction is and he replies, "A bleedin' shot, that's wot."

At last he pulls up on a slab of rock on what seems to be a cliff high above the sea, for here a wind blows and, wet with sweat as we are, we suddenly feel cold right through. Pointing to his left through the impenetrable dark our driver says, "That's it—down there," and we off-load our kit in that direction, although we can see nothing whatever. The driver, naturally enough, is in haste to be gone and, covered by the beat of his retreating engine we shuffle cautiously forward one step at a time until, with the truck's noise dying away, the sound as of gentle rain falling comes to us from right ahead, the noise of palm-trees being blown upon by a night breeze.

Then I become conscious of looking down from the edge of a steep wadi into a pool of deeper blackness than that which covers us all around. It is from this pool, some two hundred feet below, that the rustling of leaves comes. We are looking down into the one oasis in all the barren perimeter of Tobruk, the Wadi Auda. There seems no path ahead so we clamber down the rocky sides of the wadi. I'm carrying my typewriter in one hand and my bedroll with the camp bed inside it on my shoulder and I don't know how I reach the bottom without falling over.

We have to go all the way to the summit again to pick up our second load and this time, using my torch cautiously as I had seen the driver do, I see something scuttling away from underneath my precious bag with the whisky inside it. Vanderson, who has seen it too and has seen the same before, exclaims: "There's your first scorpion for you!" It seems a tiny, timid thing to enjoy so lethal a reputation.

A chink of light appears in the oasis. It turns out to be from the opened door of a stone hut, cuddled up against the side of the wadi, from which the camp adjutant, in his pyjamas, looks forth. He asks who we are and when we tell him, declares he has had

no signal to warn him of our coming. To soften the blow a bit I call out that I've got three bottles of whisky in my bag and he whistles appreciatively. But hardly are the words out of my mouth when I miss my footing on a smooth rock and fall heavily, my full weight on my canvas bag and one arm clutched underneath it. As I stumble up I detect a strong odour of whisky. After surviving all the dangers of the voyage, one of the bottles has smashed right in the presence of a man who has not tasted a drop of Scotch for two months, or a drop of any other liquor for that matter !

I find the broken glass has pierced the bag and cut my hand, but I am too tired and dispirited to do anything about this. Whisky is a disinfectant, I've heard, so I pick a few pieces of glass out of my hand in the adjutant's cabin, then he takes me to an empty tent nearby, I put up my campbed and lie straight out upon it. I can feel the blood seeping out of my hand on to the blanket and a stench of Johnnie Walker fills the whole tent but I've been going now nearly twenty-four hours and I am too weary to care. As I go to sleep I reflect on the absurdity, one's first night in Tobruk fortress, of receiving a small flesh wound through the agency of a bottle of whisky.

*August 25th, 1941.*—Awakened at nine by Roy Oliver, our conducting officer, a regular of the Royal Tank Regiment, who's been here three months already. He takes me to the M.O. to get my hand dressed, then into the officer's mess—mostly Australians—which is a wooden shanty built into the side of the hill for protection against bombing. They've been having some shelling, too, right into the wadi, but it's long-distance stuff that you can hear coming a long way off and, they say, the shells burst with a lazy 'bouff' in the soft sand, doing no damage so far (touch wood !). But a stray shell sent over at night is very upsetting.

The adjutant shows me holes in the outer wall of the mess caused by splinters from near bomb misses. The mess was formerly an Italian divisional headquarters, the stone huts being reserved for the general and high divisional officers—so the enemy knows just where to plant a bomb or a shell where it will do the most good in this particular wadi.

Roy Oliver has an old Humber staff-car which he keeps on the top of the cliff as the only track down into the wadi entails a circuit of four extra miles of villainous bumping. After breakfast we get into it and put in a strenuous morning of calling on various units in different parts of the fortress and talking to a large number of officers and men, or rather listening while they do the talking, for most have been here since the siege began five months ago and the pleasure they derive from seeing a new face and renewing contact with the world outside is great enough to be truly embarrassing. I never felt myself to be really *popular* before. Here every one looks as though he were genuinely pleased to see you—no perfunctory politeness about it.

When we went to the Royal Engineers' mess near the harbour to present the cake and the chocolates I had brought from Gaby in Cairo to Lieutenant Gubbins, the entire mess, headed by the colonel, came out on to the steps of the bomb-broken villa they inhabited and stood there like a reception committee to greet us. Then they asked us inside and offered us all the hospitality they had, which was a cup of tea made from the insufferable salty water of Tobruk which one gets used to eventually, but which tries my stomach sorely just now.

These men of Tobruk have written an entirely novel chapter in military history. There's been nothing quite of the order of this siege before. (The Cairo censor, at the moment, won't permit me to call it a *siege* in despatches, though surely the whole glory of this feat resides in the fact that we are ringed around completely by land and air—only the thin line of sea power making it possible for us to survive at all, and for half of each month the moon cuts off even this tenuous succour.) The Red Army garrison in Hango on the Gulf of Finland is now striving to emulate Tobruk's example. (For various reasons, they did not succeed.) But although the men of Tobruk are conscious and proud of their great achievement, by now they want only one thing—and that is to get the hell out of it as soon as possible.

They tell me they're tired of reading in the Press (yes, they see the Cairo papers every so often) of what wonderful fellows they are and they live only for the day when the big push comes from the frontier and they get the order to break through the perimeter

and link up with Auchinleck's army which will roll back the enemy from Sollum and Capuzzo and reconquer Cyrenaica.

Meanwhile, if Goebbels likes to believe that their morale is no good he's welcome to do so, for the truth is that the garrison is full of healthy grouses and of that spirit of cheerful complaining with which first-class troops relieve their feelings during periods of comparative inaction.

The men of Tobruk don't like newspaper stories written in Cairo describing the romance of their lives and the comfort with which they manage to surround themselves, because their lives are unbelievably hard and monotonous and, save for an occasional swim in the sea, they know no comforts whatever.

In five months no man has had more than one pint of beer or, once or twice, a tiny tot of whisky. Water distilled from the sea requires something to make it palatable but it's a treat to get a little limejuice added.

I imagine the whole garrison would cheerfully massacre the person or persons responsible for sending up from Alexandria no fewer than five thousand gin bottles for making Molotov cocktails—five thousand empty bottles without a drop of gin in them!

Although life out on the perimeter is very like trench life in the last war there are none of the compensating advantages—no cushy rest billets, no E.N.S.A. entertainments and absolutely nowhere to go if one should have a few days' leave.

The whole fighting area, which is about the size of the Isle of Wight, resembles a painting by Salvador Dali, an abomination of desolation worse than even Hollywood verisimilitude would dictate for a war film: the dun-coloured landscape, frequently whipped by sandstorms which fill the eyes, ears and mouth with offal-tasting dust and make eating a business to revolt one, is still littered with broken Italian transport, burned-out tanks and spent ammunition, as though some junk merchant had set up business on the surface of the moon.

In this wasteland every one lives in little canvas 'bivvies' well-dug into the sand or in rocky dugouts. Here one is bitten by desert fleas, bothered by scorpions and huge beetles nicknamed 'Panzer divisions' because of their hard shell; subjected to the most intense air bombing yet known in this war and to shelling



by big German batteries known as "Bardia Bill" on the east and "Salient Sue" on the west: the standard diet is bully and biscuits or tinned stew and tea, with tinned fruit as an occasional treat. And yet, against all the laws of dietetics, they look wonderfully fit.

Usually naked save for khaki shorts and a tin hat and burned bronze by the sun, they are as handsome a lot of devils as you could hope to see off the surface of a Greek vase. And they are fellows of infinite jest. The names on their dugouts rival the placards of the London newspaper vendors in wit, although for sardonic comment they would be hard put to beat the inscription on Tobruk's finest Fascist-built air-raid shelter, over whose portal is written: "BENITO MUSSOLINI, founder of the Empire"—an imperial dog kennel from some dream world of curs with the name of its exalted Fido blazoned upon it.

Of Fascismo's varied public works in Tobruk this is the only one, appropriately enough, which remains intact! The school, the municipality, the hotel, the church are all in various stages of ruin and collapse.

Moving about this sunbaked, mud-coloured terrain which seems beautifully made for war—for certainly it looks as though never in the aeons since its earth-crust was formed could it have supported a single, happy human life—I soak in so many impressions that at the end of my first day I feel incapable of sorting them out, and can only set them down in that natural (as opposed to artistic) ill order in which such things habitually crowd upon the mind.

I had thought the Australians formed almost the entire garrison. Not so. The Aussies—chiefly infantry—form about half the garrison, whilst nearly all the specialists, gunners, engineers, tank men etc., are British. . . . Tobruk's record for long service is actually held by the Northumberland Fusiliers, who have been nearly thirteen months continuously in the desert. . . . I met the commander of Tobruk fortress, General Morshead, just after he had inspected the front line positions. Both the general and his staff regularly go into the most dangerous posts in order not to lose the feeling of what it's like to be in the front line nor touch with fighting troops. The whole fortress is a front line to some

extent, of course, but there are gradations in danger. The general and staff work underground in an old Italian ammunition dump burrowed into the side of a hill, but Morshead actually sleeps and eats in a little house just outside and has an absurd little wooden privy, boldly labelled "G.O.C.," in an exposed position on the plain nearby, as though inviting enemy bombers to do their very worst. Morshead is a very small man, mild, but faintly censorious in manner. I wonder why, until his A.D.C. tells me he had once taught school. He tells me he wants to see every word I write. ("He'll censor every bloody word himself, and correct the grammar too," the A.D.C. whispers.) This seems to me undue attention to detail in a general officer commanding—but we'll see how it works out. Perhaps a general can afford to be more sparing of the blue pencil than some of the lieutenant-censors I've had to deal with. Morshead doesn't give you the impression of being a commander born, like Freyberg, V.C., the New Zealand general, but to support the terrible responsibility of a siege such as this I suppose a steadier, more humdrum temperament is needed. He has to be on the alert day and night, weary month after weary month. He can never know when the enemy may not throw an overwhelming weight of armour at one selected, weak spot in his 30-mile defence line.

He has about 70 tanks, mostly obsolescent types, held back in reserve. The perimeter itself is so long and of his 20,000 men so many have to be dotted around inside as protection against parachutists, as ack-ack gunners and coastal defence men that the numbers actually holding the perimeter trenches must in places be very thin . . . A full-blown Anglican bishop may shortly be seen within the fortress. A British padre whose Military Cross was won at Dunkirk tells me he is conducting a Confirmation class numbering several score, and he has told the lads that as soon as they are proficient a bishop is ready to come up from Alexandria to conduct a mass confirmation service. Knowing the padre to be an Irishman, however, some of the men suspect blarney in this and (I later discover) are patronising the class on the assumption that His Grace will funk it at the last moment and they may then apply for leave in Alexandria to "finish the job." This padre was burying a man in the big and ever-growing cemetery down

by the harbour when a Stuka raid began. The parson broke off the service and told the company to take cover, he himself running to a slit trench. Bombs fell very close. When he clambered out he found several of the mourners had jumped into the open grave. . . . This cemetery holds the grave of the first Victoria Cross won in the Middle East this war, that of the Australian, Corporal J. H. Edmondson, who, though mortally wounded, went to the rescue of his officer who was being strangled by two Germans in hand-to-hand combat. Edmondson killed both, besides other Nazis, before succumbing himself. . . .

Enemy planes repeatedly bombed a spot in the open desert, apparently entirely without motive, whereupon a young officer had a brain wave and ordered the whole area to be dug up. The spades of our pioneers disclosed an Italian ammunition dump beneath which has since been used to fire back at the enemy. . . .

An enormous amount of Italian war material captured here when Wavell originally took the town was, fortunately, left behind ; there is no doubt that had we had to rely solely upon the equipment we brought with us into the place when the perimeter was sealed up again, we could scarcely have held Tobruk. After five months of siege a large number of Italian guns and mortars are still being used against their former owners and the enemy left behind so much ammunition that there is no risk of the shells being exhausted before the guns themselves wear out. . . . I went to see some of the Aussie ' Bush Artillery ' as they are called. Drivers, cooks and such odds and ends among the Australians had taken over some of the oldest Italian pieces which the regular artillery scorned to use and dragged them into position themselves, found the right calibre shells and then asked the gunners to teach them how to fire. The first few rounds, they say, were let off with bits of string, pulled from a safe distance, so doubtful were all concerned that the wretched old weapons might not blow up. They fired ' over open sights.' They had to. None of the guns had any sights on them. Becoming more proficient (although scaring the wits out of the genuine artillerymen) the Bush Gunners delighted to play weird pranks on the enemy. Recently they actually sniped with a fieldgun at a solitary German, whom they sighted through an ancient telescope borrowed from

the navy, in the act of performing his natural functions. One or two shells fell not far from the Nazi who continued to apply himself to his task, not believing that any gun-crew could be crazy enough to range on one man. Several shells straddled him before it was suddenly borne in upon him that he was indeed a military objective and then, gathering himself together, he bolted into a cave. . . . On Monday, General Morshead ordered the garrison to pay more attention to their daily shave : next day a bomb blew up the dump where the razor blades were stored. . . . The grand old man of Tobruk is Admiral Sir Walter Cowan who, although over seventy, insisted on coming to Tobruk, so they made for him a post as 'naval liaison officer.' He was a master of hounds before the war and, they say, always wanted to die in the saddle. Now that his hounds are disbanded for the duration, his best chance of meeting an active death is certainly right here. I saw him going into headquarters, a quiet-looking old gentleman wearing an extraordinary combination of naval and military uniforms. . . . \*

Tobruk is well served with news. There are quite a lot of radios about and Reuter's bulletins are picked up daily : in addition the Australians run two papers, *Tobruk Truth*, whose subtitle is *The Dinkum Oil*, and another called *Mud and Blood*. The latter is running a £100 sweepstake on the Melbourne Cup race. There's plenty of money about in Tobruk. The sergeant in our mess has £85 standing in his paybook. There's nothing to spend it on here except the slender Naafi supplies. Once a week or ten days (less frequently, if a supply ship happens to be sunk) a ration of chocolate and cigarettes is given. The men say they've rarely missed their free ration of fifty smokes a week. On last Naafi day the British canteen took £3000 in cash and the Australian one about the same again.

*August 26th, 1941.*—Went for a swim before breakfast in the little bay at the mouth of the Wadi Audra. Nobody thinks of wearing a bathing suit. Tobruk is a club for gentlemen only. The

\* In the next Libyan campaign Admiral Cowan was captured by the Italians, but after several months in an Italian prison was exchanged, and landed still looking for death or danger, in Alexandria, from which the war had receded many hundreds of miles.

water is exquisite, clear as a well, and as you wade in scores of little pink fish swim between your legs. Swimming under water, you can see them coming towards you through the translucent liquid, their mouths opening and closing petulantly like specimens seen up against the glass of an aquarium.

The wadi is clustered around with barrels of crude oil. These guard against a surprise attack from the sea : fire an incendiary bullet into one of them, and the whole thing catches fire, emitting clouds of black smoke which rapidly affords cover for the defenders and burns for quite a time—long enough, anyhow, for the issue to be decided on the beaches.

This morning I visited the principal ack-ack sites and soon learned why Tobruk has become such a testing-ground for anti-aircraft defence that specialist officers have come from America to study how it's done on the spot.

In just under five months since the siege began the ack-ack gunners of Tobruk have shot down 77 enemy planes for certain and have probably destroyed at least 70 more. The perimeter is so small and the enemy often bomb from such a height that there's no doubt a stricken bomber will often crash into enemy territory or into the sea far out of sight of land and will never be credited to the gunners. The other night out of 23 planes that came over, the guns claimed two for certain, one probably shot down and four hit, whereas a Luftwaffe prisoner taken a few days after testified that we had on this occasion hit every single plane out of the 23.

During the same period 2892 enemy aircraft were engaged by our guns in 736 distinct raids and a conservative estimate is that 600 tons of bombs fell upon the town. When it's recalled that the last British fighter had to be withdrawn from the inadequate little airfield above the harbour as early as April 23rd, it will be realised that the Tobruk ack-ack have achieved results entitling it to very particular attention when the history of the war as a whole comes to be written. These remarkable results were achieved without barrage balloons or any air support at all—entirely by guns and men on the ground.

At ack-ack headquarters they showed me maps on which had been plotted every projectile which had fallen on Tobruk. You

can see that whereas a few months ago bombs were concentrated on the town and harbour, the enemy is now being made to scatter them over a much wider area—in other words the barrage covering the chief objectives is so intense that the enemy cannot penetrate it in force but it is obliged each time to unload some bombs wide of the mark.

Ack-ack in Tobruk is in charge of a brigadier, with a full brigade staff; that shows the important share it takes in the defence of the fortress as a whole.

As I stood talking to the brigadier a posse of high-level and Stuka bombers, with a few fighters even higher, came over the harbour which lay, a puddle of cobalt blue infiltrating into the grey-dun desert a mile and half down there below us. The brigadier, after a quick expert tally, announced forty-four planes in all. Nobody took cover, because the first bombs had already gone down into the harbour area. 'Woomp-woomp' . . . 'woomp-woomp.' They sang down at regular intervals. Simultaneously, the sky filled up with shell bursts. There was very little noise. The waters of the harbour syphoned up into huge spouts and columns of dust arose in the town. It was all over in a couple of minutes. The enemy planes wheeled away and turned seaward.

"Looks as though they were going for the jetties and the stores that were unloaded there last night," said the brigadier. "But you see how wide many of those bombs fell."

When the smoke cleared away the town appeared totally unchanged. It was already a whitened sepulchre in that not a house in it was whole. But apart from displacing some more ruined bricks and mortar, the raid seemed to have achieved nothing. The jetties had not been hit.

I went down into the town. They were lowering the red flag just outside over the notice which reads: "When flag is hoisted, denoting air-raid in progress, do not enter the town."

Down near the water's edge I came upon the most strafed gunners in the town—a light battery manned by Scotsmen. They had just been firing at the Stukas and the ground all around their gun site was littered every few inches with splinters. Had I been in their shoes, I could not have resisted going for cover when

those bombs were coming down, but these men not only went on firing but also braved the dangers from their own shrapnel, which falls like rain at a time like this. Their site was surrounded by huge craters yet they tell me they've not had a casualty so far in twenty-one weeks although they've been bombed out of their sleeping holes several times and had all their clothes destroyed. Their present dugout is labelled 'The Dead End Kids'—an appropriate name as in a cellar underneath where they had been sleeping they found a cache of Italian high explosive a week previously.

The commander of a heavy battery on top of the hill near Fort Paletrina told me some of the Stuka raids were more efficient than others but, on the whole, they found the Stuka pilots, who were mostly Italian, had a marked distaste for the barrage and had got into the habit of releasing their bombs far too high.

"We've heard from prisoners," he said, "that the leading Stuka is often piloted by a German who demonstrates to the planes behind how to do it. I've seen the rear Stuka, who must also be a Nazi, I fancy, actually fire a burst at the Italians in the middle to force them to go into their dive when they have hung back on seeing the leading plane destroyed."

This battery was originally in Hyde Park in London and had been in Norway before doing eight months in all in Tobruk, both before and after the siege, and the men feel they've earned a change of scene.

They include a London bus driver, an architect, a coal miner and my old friend, Patrick Perry, formerly the chief correspondent of Reuters in North America.

Sergeant Perry, tanned the colour of teak, and wearing a pair of shorts and 'sneakers' told me: "Tobruk is a real laboratory of ack-ack science because we've now been through every conceivable type and variety of attack and we feel we've really learned something that will be of use to Allied armies all over the world."

None of the batteries was stationary but they moved around as often as possible to confuse the enemy, the men having to dig out tons of rock and sand to form a new site each time a move was made.

He introduced me to 'Larry the Lamb,' the battery mascot, who came through the Italian lines one night and has grown into a handsome sheep who will not leave the site, although the grazing is mighty sparse thereabouts. However, he has learned to eat bully. He is as sensitive as a predictor, always going to cover when he hears the distant hum of enemy planes.

"We wonder if he could tell Jerries from ours," added Patrick, "but of course one can't tell, because we never see a British plane, as you know."

I want to ask him to a meal down in the wadi but discover, to my annoyance, that this is impossible since he is a sergeant and I "have the status of an officer" and hence have to inhabit an officers' mess. This kind of thing seems absurd in a place like Tobruk and yet, I suppose, a certain amount of segregation of the ranks is desirable. In ordinary circumstances one might, theoretically, have a place where all ranks messed together, yet I think other ranks probably, and sergeants *certainly*, would still want some place to which they could retire on their own, shaking off the company of their seniors.

I never felt much sympathy, at the start of the war, for the agitation which took the line, "It's frightfully undemocratic not to let private *and* generals go to the Ritz or Berkeley together," because I knew that in those early days the enlisted ranks of the army contained a number of rich men and that this plea merely covered their desire to be free to go on patronising the expensive places they had habitually gone to in Civvy Street. The *real* private soldier, who never had been able to afford the expensive eating-places of London on, say, £3 a week in peace, certainly could not patronise them now on his two bob a day. The issue was a false one.

*August 27th, 1941.*—I'm feeling pretty wretched to-day. I'm covered with scores of red spots around the middle—looks like some horrible disease—but is, in fact, merely a severe dose of the universal desert plague, fleas. I caught and killed no fewer than twenty in my pyjamas on rising. They are great lusty hoppers who live in the sand normally until some good fresh meat from Alexandria comes along, then they muscle in on the newcomer's



bedroll. Old hands here, their blood thinned, are rarely attacked, they say.

In somewhat convalescent mood, I head towards the biggest entertainment event here for sometime—a concert in a great cave up at the headquarters of the Tank squadrons. They say it's not possible to show films in Tobruk and hence the only feasible form of amusement is an occasional concert. Yet in this great cave, once an ammunition dump, one could well show 16 mm. films at least. But I suppose it would be hard to ensure that every one got his turn at the movies. About 300 men can be squeezed into the cave at a session.

Our guns were beginning their evening strafe as I reached the cave which is just at the epicentre of the fortress. I suppose they keep the tanks as nearly equidistant as possible from any point in the line where the enemy might break through. From the cave's entrance I could see our shells bursting on the gentle undulation which crowns the salient the Germans forced in the original perimeter a couple of months ago and where the pick of the Afrika Korps now faces the élite of the Tobruk garrison. Presently the German guns replied, the shells keening over my head and bursting on the ridge behind.

This habit of the 'morning hate' and the 'evening hate,' practised by both sides, seems to me the most wasteful form of artillery nonsense. Nobody is about on that ridge behind to get hurt and I dare say it's just the same on the enemy's side. Yet the scene is so reminiscent of Ypres or Cambrai, with the sun sinking into a fiery sky and the guns 'registering' nicely all along the enemy positions whilst the Fascists go to ground underneath, that it would surely draw a nostalgic sigh from veterans of the last war, had any such been about. But of course nearly all these soldiers around me were infants in those days.

The O.C. Tanks, a very youthful major, takes me through the mouth of the cave into a small chamber hollowed out of the rock to one side. One can't stand up but the interior is white-washed and very clean, with a trestle table and benches to seat eight at a time. This is the officers' mess. They tell me it's quite blast-proof and that even if something burst right in the mouth of the cave, the explosion would travel straight through, giving the mess the

go-by. The beat of an engine comes from a distance—it's a captured Italian motor-cycle turned into a stationary engine to provide electricity for the mess and power to drive its home-made fan constructed out of old petrol tins.

The mechanical turn of mind gives these tank men a big advantage over infantrymen when it comes to improvising little comforts and making things shipshape. And although our petrol tins are undoubtedly wasteful compared to the German can with its non-spilling spout and insulated lining, you can't cut the German container up into a thousand different gadgets, from cooking stoves to lampshades, as you can with ours. This mess is full of little gadgets made from old tins.

On the wall—rare refinement of taste!—there is only one picture, a photograph of two beautiful girls in a silver frame. The picture was presented to the mess by an Italian officer who felt grateful for the food and good treatment received here before he was sent off to the P.O.W. cage. The girls, depicted in a languorous pose with arms entwined were, he said, his sister and young step-mother. The Italian did not explain, however—and it was not thought correct to ask him—how it came about that the two ladies were entirely nude.

We sat down to an excellent supper of tinned oyster stew, followed by meat and two vegetables and tinned peaches. Later, I was horrified to discover what immense trouble my hosts had been to to secure such delicacies for a special occasion. The shelling went on all through the meal. Sometimes the ground shook above us, as one dropped near, but you have a sense of complete security down here, and nobody pays any note to the noise, except occasionally to raise the voice and talk louder to drown it.

When the stars twinkled out and the noise of the guns died down, we moved back into the main cave. That morning, two men cleaning up in preparation for the concert had touched off an old Italian hand-grenade in a dark corner. One had been killed and the other wounded.

Reference was made to this in a casual way.

"Bad show. The chap who 'bought it' ought to have been in the concert to-night. Had a good voice, too. Bad show."

Perhaps mechanisation breeds in tank crews the same attitude towards casualties as you find in the R.A.F. ? The infantry seem to take their losses more *personally*.

It's wonderful what they've done in this cave with a few army blankets, again old petrol tins and odd bits of wood : there is a stage, with spot-lights, a curtain and wings properly screened and seated on the ground, an absolutely packed house of Australians, men from Britain, Poles and a few Indians. They could truthfully hang an "S.R.O." sign outside.

The compère, a sergeant with a racy line of talk, introduces each turn. They are all frontline troops, moved for a rest a mile or two into the 'rear areas' which in any other front would be considered far too exposed.

A Welsh choir leads off with "Land of My Fathers," a bunch of Aussies sing a ditty composed by one of them about the troopships leaving Sydney Harbour (this owes a little to the famous "A Troopship was leaving Bombay, bound for old Blighty's shores"—but not *too* much), and a private with a ukulele puts over some good patter songs. There are a few old bawdy army favourites sung in which every one joins, but not many of this character. I am interested to observe that by far the most popular numbers are the sentimental songs, put over with a real break in the voice—the sort that deal in Dear Old Mothers, Sweethearts Left Behind, Girls with Golden Smiles, and all that kind of thing. Cholerick old gentlemen may write to the papers against the alleged degeneracy of crooning but here, it's plain to see, the private soldier goes for Bing Crosby stuff in a big way. And there is nothing conspicuously degenerate about the Tobruk garrison, my worthy Cheltenham colonel who writes to the *Times* !

The dark cave, the rapt faces extracting far more from the banal words than the tongue-in-cheek, Tin-Pan-Alley composers ever put into them, the occasional growling explosion without competing with the young tenor voices—all this might have moved even a Nazi into a sense of shame, and certainly made me feel that, compared with these men, my part in the war so far had been soft and unimportant, altogether contemptible.

At the end of the evening the tank major appeared on the

stage to thank the organisers of the show and then—rather to my horror—he said there was a war correspondent in the house, one of the few of that ilk whom they'd yet seen in Tobruk, and he proposed to ask him to step up and say a few words. So saying, he pulled me up on to the platform.

I am anything but a practised speaker. But in such circumstances, what could even the glibbest orator find to say? The last time I spoke in public had been to a tricky audience; Washington in September, 1939, a Left Wing gathering which in those early days thought the war was 'phoney' and 'Imperialist,' that Chamberlain would make a deal with Hitler even then after doing a little 'token' fighting, and that Progressives in America must do all they could to keep their country out of the mess. I told them that though the war might look 'phoney,' it was capable of being developed into a People's War if the people took its direction upon themselves, that whether "Progressive" America felt interested or not every Left Wing force in Europe must gradually align itself with us and that ultimately the Soviet Union could not fail to find herself upon our side. I met a good deal of barracking but felt confident, because I believed in my case. But what could I say to these men that they would want to hear, that would not sound cheap and presumptuous in one who was only in the siege for a short while, who did not have to stay there till the bitter end but could, if he liked, sail back to the Cairene fleshpots on the next destroyer?

(This occurred long before Bataan, remember, or Stalingrad. This garrison was making military history: they, and the whole world, knew it.)

So I just mumbled something about my understanding that they were pretty browned off with some of the boloney that had appeared in the Press on the subject of the siege (ironical cheers and cries of "You said it"!), but I asked them not to blame the correspondents too much because it was very difficult to get up to Tobruk and few were permitted to come in. I had come to see for myself and to try to write some stuff that would in some small measure do justice to the great facts of the story, and would give the folks at home a sober and true picture, without false heroics, of what was going on in this remarkable place where precedents

were being thrown aside and the seemingly impossible being done each new day.

I felt smug, parsonical and acutely non-combatant standing there. However, they did not seem to mind and, as I stepped down, a mock-formal delegation came forward and presented me with a battered can, reputed to be the oldest tin of bully in Tobruk, alleged to have been dug out of the Roman grave of one of Cæsar Augustus's soldiers.

Without, the night was so dark one could not see to clamber through the barbed wire, so my hospitable tank major lent me a couple of blankets and bedded me down in a slit trench outside with a length of corrugated iron over it, to keep off the dew or the shrapnel, should a blitz develop. So I bivouacked with them all there under the inky sky and turned out with the squadron at reveillé.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NO PEACE FOR THE BRAVE

THE ITALIANS have largely themselves to blame for the fact that their shelling of Tobruk is so ineffective. Their fortress is dissected by deep wadies in every direction and the dug-outs and trenches they built afford our men such excellent protection that their shellfire—though greatly increased of late—is very wasteful. When I went up to see the brigade which holds the extreme eastern sector of the perimeter, I found that they had been the recipients of no fewer than 1500 shells that morning, with only three slight shrapnel casualties, whilst the previous afternoon the brigade holding the opposite (western) end of the perimeter had said *Hallo* to 2264 rounds, mostly from Italian ‘seventy-fives,’ without a single man being scratched.

None the less the padre of this eastern brigade tells me the shelling has nuisance value.

“I was just starting an open-air service,” he said, “and as I was saying ‘Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together,’ etc., shells began plopping over, so we didn’t remain gathered together very long. After a lull, we came out of the dug-outs and I tried to get going with the Creed, but I’d hardly begun when another salvo whistled over and we went to ground again; and so it went on. I started the lads off with a hymn, but the infernal Ities interrupted that too, so finally I had to postpone the service altogether.”

However, the traffic is two-way and as I drove up the Bardia road towards the eastern end of Tobruk our own batteries were firing. I saw the flashes of our guns from pits alongside the road, then the bursts among the Italian lines only two miles distant. This road runs uninterruptedly straight to where, through the heat haze, telegraph poles emerge, transformed by the mirage into the semblance of a mosque with minarets. Here Italian country begins, and it would have been easy for the guileless new-

comer to drive a car straight into it. There is not even a road bloc—just a smooth surface leading you into the enemy's midst : so one has to keep a sharp eye on the kilometre posts, to be sure of not going too far.

After tea with an Australian battalion headquarters in a hut that had once been an Italian frontline bordello (and was still exotic by reason of its blue painted ceilings with stars on), I went up to a forward post. Unlike most of the perimeter, the country here is almost beautiful. The post commands a wadi one hundred feet deep and a stretch of our wire running right down to the Mediterranean. No Man's Land here is about 2000 yards wide, but both sides patrol up and down the wadies, which somewhat resemble a stretch of the Dorset hills by the sea. A big sugarloaf cliff with a placid-looking bathing beach beneath marks the nearest Italian post.

Our own post is one of these splendid jobs the Italian engineers have presented us with. Its concrete tunnels run deep into the hill and there is room to stand erect inside—room, even to put up beds.

Our machine-guns open fire as our party comes up. The colonel is with us. He is going out to lead a patrol himself. He tells me to shin up an observation-pole about thirty feet high. From the top I can see comfortably into enemy territory. A few bursts of enemy fire come back at us : but nobody takes any notice.

This is actually the second time I've been under direct fire in my life. My instinct, foolishly, is to duck my head—like a bird which puts its head under its wing. But the fact that the colonel and four of his men are standing below me methodically checking watches and tommy-guns in the bright sunshine makes it easier for me to affect to ignore the enemy, as they do.

The colonel leads his tiny patrol down the hill and across our barbed wire. A short way from where the colonel is walking now, the sea looks deliciously inviting, with fleecy clouds afloat over it. What a temptation it must be for the patrol to turn aside and take a swim instead of reconnoitring the enemy ! But the colonel leads them methodically onward, as though stalking deer. Soon our men pass from sight. They suspect a temporary Italian post

was installed last night and propose to pin it down precisely during daylight then, to-night, send out a fighting patrol to beat it up.

For an hour or two we stand about smoking on that sunny upland. There is a lull, with only an occasional shot coming from the hill opposite. A fat Australian captain gives me half a dozen of those little red Italian hand-grenades which, he says, "make excellent egg-cups for the wife." (They did, too.)

At dusk the colonel's party treks homeward, its mission done. To-night there will be what is called a 'party' up there on the dark cliffs, above the moonlit sea.

*August 30, 1941.*—So much for day patrolling. To-night I'm sampling a little of the moonless kind—a good deal more exciting, even for a non-combatant like me.

I'm going up to the salient in a ration truck, with Roy Oliver and a sergeant. Up here, around Post S10, where the Germans pushed a bulge into the perimeter last spring which has never been straightened out, our men are fighting under conditions as full of danger, dirt and monotony as anything known in Flanders a quarter of a century ago. Any one who supposed, on the strength of experiencing a few air-raids in Britain, that this is a civilian's war, would change his mind as quickly as I did if he visited the Tobruk salient. Up here the boys have no respite at all. They're under fire day and night and even when relieved after ten days or a fortnight in the line, they have nowhere to go for rest or recreation.

The sky is starlit but moonless as we sway and rattle wildly over several miles of stone-covered desert, plunging up and down the sides of steep gullies. I'm sitting on top of hotboxes which contain a meal of stew and rice and suet pudding. We also carry water and the mails.

The front lines in this sector are in places only 150 yards apart and the hard ground makes it impossible to dig deep dug-outs so both the enemy and ourselves are unable to move much during daylight. Both sides come out to stretch their legs and get a hot meal at night. They say there is an unofficial armistice while both sides get their meal. But like so many other things which 'they say' at the front, I find this is untrue.



Every few yards, as we approach the front line, sentries pop up like ghosts to check our identity and ensure we are not straying off our course, as there are plenty of minefields around here.

When it becomes unsafe to go farther in the truck, we unload its contents out on to the desert to be picked up by the ration party, and then make off ourselves over country which in the dark looks like a high moorland.

A starshell shoots up from the German lines and we freeze stiff to camouflage ourselves against the desert, like children playing that game of creeping up on a 'He' who will disqualify you if you move when he looks around.

On our left British machine-guns suddenly bark. A stream of tracer shoots back from the enemy line. When the machine-gun rattles again we would have been permanently disqualified if we had not all three thrown ourselves flat on our faces, for we find ourselves on a German 'fixed line' shoot. Bullets from a Spandau zip over our heads. We lie motionless several minutes, fearing it would fire again. I think we are all digging into the soft sand with our fingers. That's instinct, I suppose. The Germans probably know the track between the minefield through which every one approaches Post S10 and keep a gun trained down it permanently.

After a respectful interval, we pull ourselves to our feet and creep forward. Two more starshells make us freeze afresh. It's so quiet you don't talk for fear you will be heard: but that's nonsense, of course.

With considerable thankfulness we lower ourselves at last into a concrete tunnel which leads into the post. Underground, by the light of candles, we find a whole company of Australians assembled, plates and mugs in hand, eager as *Oliver Twist* for their supper. When they hear we've brought their letters up in a bag, they drop their eating irons and fall eagerly upon the mail, which had averaged only some thirteen days from places as far away as Brisbane and Sydney.

In a back chamber of the fort there are some men asleep in blankets on the floor: others playing cards or writing letters for us to take down when we go. One can't help being reminded of

the play *Journey's End* except that these lads are younger—all fresh from school or college—and any preoccupation with rank is entirely forgotten. They all address each other by their first names.

Their language is so full of Bees that the satisfying old English words no longer have any meaning. The word which Dr. Johnson defined as "a term of endearment common among sailors" is, equally, a mark of affection among Australians.

There is no atmosphere of enforced jollity here. Nobody makes any pretence of enjoying the job they have to do. They curse it and hate it. Yet with us they are extraordinarily equable and pleasant. They are avid of news from outside, asking me, "When's Cairo going to give us the green light so we can break out of here?" Then, jokingly, "When's the Red Army coming to give us a visit?"

At this point the food arrives and every one falls to, eating where they stand or lie. One officer tells me they've been here ten days and may have to stay a week more: then they'll go back to the coast, clean up and have some bathing. The men out in the observation holes can't move at all during the day: they have to relieve themselves on the spot. The flies are very bad during the heat of the day.

The captain in charge says the enemy don't seem to have an unlimited supply of ammunition and are in fact somewhat niggardly with it, which suits us fine. We too don't fire very much for some of our holes are supposed to be secret—not to be revealed until it's time for an attack.

The lieutenant who led a patrol out last night tells me the proceedings were enlivened by a white donkey which appeared from nowhere in No Man's Land and began muzzling his face as he lay on the ground.

"The moon was bright," he said, "and the moke must have made a brilliant white target, but the enemy didn't shoot and I hadn't the heart to kill the brute either, though he might have given us away. The donkey followed us around all night. It was a good job perhaps we didn't run into the enemy. As we came back in again the donkey, which was still following, trod on a mine. It exploded but by some miracle the donkey wasn't killed.

Still, he was scared stiff and trotted away into No Man's Land and we never saw him again."

I stayed several hours down there. The atmosphere was foetid and oppressive. Yet when the time came to go I felt badly about my freedom to do so. I told them where the best swimming was to be had and we said we hoped we'd meet down in the Wadi Auda next week. Out of this bunch I wonder how many will never keep that appointment?

For these boys, leaving the line is no real rest. For them 'leave' just means exchanging one hole for another, a little nearer the sea: it just means exchanging shelling and sniping for having bombs dropped on one. For these men in this war, no *estaminets* sell leave-time liquid cheer, no bright lights glow or orchestras play. But when it's all over there surely ought to be a special medal for every man who's stood up to Tobruk's tremendous racket month after month and given the enemy back as good again.

We've found out in this war that we can almost all be heroes one night at a time, when the bombs come down. But one should try being here six months before aspiring to keep company with the men of Tobruk.

We creep back the way we came up, freezing and unfreezing as before. When we found the truck again, the motor wouldn't start. We whispered curses like conspirators. Then at last she roared up: the noise must have been heard in every German dug-out within a couple of miles. But the Germans weren't interested in us. We rattled away down the line until we became too vague about the minefields for comfort. It was pitch-black. So we stopped the truck and slept the rest of the night on the desert.

At dawn there came a rattle of machine-guns from up at Post S10. Having had their chow and read their letters, our friends were getting down to another day's work.

*September 1st.*—Yesterday was an uneventful day. But just after noon to-day there were developments which made me regret I had suggested to those boys in Post S10 that they try the Wadi Auda for a rest cure.

What happened—although one did not realise it at the time—was that to celebrate the second anniversary of their attack on Poland the Germans put over the biggest air-raid ever made in Africa up to that time. From every airfield within reach of Tobruk, including those on Crete, they assembled a force of 141 Stukas and high-level bombers and put them over Tobruk in a five-minute raid which was meant to 'saturate' the defences. We, in our small wadi, with its eight tents the only targets, were singled out by no less than 25 Stukas.

I had just had a bath in an old Italian wine barrel and had retired to my tent to eat my first prickly pear, when the roar of aircraft was heard. I came to the mouth of the tent which, fortunately was dug in to about two feet, just in time to see a big formation unloading their bombs over the port. I watched them wheeling away, silvery in the sunlight and was just congratulating myself, as one does, that some poor other guys were on the receiving end, when there came an ear-cracking whistle and a blast which threw me off my feet.

Instinctively I rolled back into the tent and lay on the soft sandy floor. And I began digging with my hands to try to get myself deeper into the earth. There followed a series of frightful noises. Sticks of Stuka bombs coming down all around us. I detected sharp pinging sounds—splinters coming through the tenting, as I afterwards discovered. The tent filled with sand and smoke. My lungs felt like bursting. The explosions pressed down upon one with an enormous weight: it didn't feel as though explosives were being dropped upon one but as though vast objects—steamrollers, or railway locomotives, perhaps—were being thrown down from a height of thousands of feet, whistling in crescendo as they came.

I remember thinking, "Well, this is the end of me. The next one will be my last."

All I had time to hope for was that it would be over quick. And I felt surprise because I had always had a hunch that I would not be killed until I was at least thirty-five. And here was I, still thirty-two, and apparently done for. I was rather indignant, as though somebody was about to cheat me. Perhaps many people who have been very closely bombed have had the same feelings?

When the silence came, it was as striking as the noise had been. The screaming of the bombs suddenly gave place to the roar of engines climbing away from the Wadi Auda. I got up from the floor just in time to see the last of our tormentors mounting away.

Roy Oliver crawled out from the mess, where he had been lying on the floor. We inspected the damage. Two tents blown to pieces, bomb craters every few yards, but nobody wounded. Very few people had been in the camp at the time. The Germans, it was surmised, had assumed the Wadi Auda was a Polish transit camp. Had the camp been full, a lot of soldiers would indeed have been killed.

Roy paced out the distance from the nearest bomb hole at the back of my tent—just 10 yards to where I had been lying. Scraps of metal lay on the floor, still hot, and there were holes all over my roof. I had been very, very lucky. The soft sand had absorbed much of the blast, otherwise I could hardly have hoped to get away with it.

My legs now began to feel shaky but my head was wildly elated. I laughed at Roy's slightest witticism and consumed a mug of tea as though it had been champagne. I was, in fact, slightly 'bomb happy.'

Next day we had another stroke of luck. Driving out to visit the Northumberland Fusiliers, Roy drove us into a truck. But nobody was hurt. That night there was a heavy raid. I moved out of the tent in the middle of it and went to sleep in Roy's stone hut. The commandant does not want men sleeping alone in a tent at night, says it's better to be two together during a raid. We leave the door open to see the flaming onions in the sky and every now and then there's a great red flash as a big bomb comes down. The raid lasts almost all night. How tired those gunners must get!

Next day a message comes from Reuters to suggest I return to Cairo. I go to say farewell to General Morshead but find that there will be no ship leaving for four days on account of the bright harvest moon.

Now comes the worst part of my stay. I am obliged to spend four more days and nights in Tobruk with nothing to do. I can

understand any one going crazy in this place unless all his time was taken up. On the last day I went thoroughly over the town. In the ruined church I climbed into the organ loft and played Chopin's *Funeral March* to myself. A British soldier came in to listen. He said he was a Baptist. Looking around the garish building, with its inscriptions recording how worthy "Fascist citizens" had subscribed their lire to build the place, he observed: "Poor taste, ain't it?"

One could not but agree. The woodwork, the gilding, the pictures were extraordinarily shoddy. The image of the Virgin turned out to be papier mâché. I later noticed the same thing in other churches in Italian Africa. The Church had allied itself with Fascism but the ecclesiastical forms which resulted were as second-rate as the structure of the Fascist state itself.

Returning to the camp, we found that a high-level raid had been made on it at precisely the same time as the Stuka raid. Roy's and my hut had had one wall blown down by the blast. This time one of the orderlies who had been sheltering in a cave had had the ill-luck to be wounded by splinters in the groin. The poor chap's legs were in a bad state. His first worry was over his own virility. (This thought tortures many men wounded in the mid-section, before they know how badly they've been hit.)

"Are they O.K., sir?" said this fellow to the doctor. And when told he could still be a father-of-six if he felt like it, he smiled all over his face and went off to hospital quite happily (where, incidentally, he was raided again that same night.)

At midnight on September 8th I went down to the harbour and embarked on the destroyer *Decoy*. There were a lot of wounded being taken aboard on stretchers. Two other destroyers were in that night. An alert took place as we were standing on the beach waiting to go aboard. Several planes 'stooged over' but did not attack the ships. They'll catch us on the way out, perhaps.

And so about one o'clock in the morning, we slipped noiselessly out of the harbour and started off at full speed down the coast. Some Australians on board had been in Tobruk four months. I had been there just a little over two weeks, but I could appreciate a little how they felt. They were wild with delight

over beer and bacon and eggs in the wardroom. We all lay down to sleep on the wardroom floor. The ship's black cat, inevitably named 'Nigger,' made up to me, but spoilt my slumber by sticking her tail in my eye. An hour out of Tobruk, a squadron of bombers made an attack on the three destroyers. One or two fell wide in the water. Then came a dull crash which sent the destroyer careening over at an acute angle. Every one jumped up from the floor, thinking we had been hit. But an officer shouted down from above, "Don't move—the ship's all right." A near miss had brought down part of the wireless aerial but had not penetrated the hull. After that, there was peace.

Next day was brilliant and clear. Fighters covered us most of the way down to Alexandria, where we docked in the early afternoon, enabling me to reach Cairo in time for dinner that night.

The destroyers from Tobruk were saluted by all the ships as they entered the harbour. A young lieutenant went around asking all the soldiers to line up at attention, to return the honours. One of the Australians took a poor view of this.

"Bloody pompous business," he growled, and broke his attitude of stiff salute to point towards the quayside.

"That's what *I'm* interested in," he said. "First I've seen for sixteen bloody weeks. Isn't she *beautiful* . . . ?"

And he indicated an object standing there—gross, flabby, almost black. But could it be? . . . yes, it was . . . A Woman!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE BIRTH OF THE BLUE

IN CAIRO the women were pre-1939, in some ways pre-last war. To some of us, they seemed like feudal queens. Something like two or three hundred European women had permanently at their beck and call anywhere between 30,000 to 40,000 men. Never in modern times have women received such homage, been more spoiled, than the fashionable women of Cairo during the three years of the Desert War, 1940-1943.

It would be foolish and impossible to enumerate all the famous Cairene beauties of the period—a period which has now passed into history, for the gaiety and attraction of Cairo at this time depended absolutely upon the continuance of the war in the desert just as the gaiety of the Brussels ball on the eve of Waterloo depended upon the bloody events that were to ensue. For Cairo well knew its own naughtiness—knew that the only justification for such unethical behaviour in the midst of a bloody war was the proximity of the bloody war itself. In the last war Allenby, shocked by the laxity of the place, emptied the Cairene fleshpot out into the desert. He moved his headquarters into the sands in order to toughen morale before his Palestine campaign began.

Wavell and Auchinleck would have wished to do the same but the number of troops in the Nile Valley this war far exceeded those there in 1917, and the ramifications of a modern G.H.Q., with its thousands of miles of telephone wires, its need for rapid wireless communication and for enormous numbers of motor vehicles whose maintenance called for great establishments close to railhead and the ports meant that Cairo was too valuable a base to abandon. And in the Mokkatam hills behind the city there lay a ten-year accumulation of war-like stores of all kinds. These had to be guarded. The ancient citadel of Cairo lived fully up to its name from 1940 on. The city itself was our most important base outside the British Isles. It could not be abandoned.



Nor could the normalcy of a "non-belligerent" capital be interfered with to any extent. Therefore Cairo the Arsenal and Workshop and Cairo the refined Gomorrah continued to exist side by side.

The moralist shook his head. But the average soldier from the desert thought it was both naughty and nice. By that I do not mean that our troops led a fast life there. Such I know was a common feeling among families at home. But nothing could be further from the facts. The girl who pictured her man toying with *houris* was giving herself needless suffering. By no stretch of ingenuity, could there have been enough *houris* to go round. The modern conscript does not care for prostitution: few have ever been obliged to resort to it at home and in a Muslim country where women are still for the most part forbidden any friendships outside the home, the type of prostitution which exists as a necessary outlet is usually far too crude to appeal to men from the West. Indeed, I believe most soldiers would agree that the popular conception of a voyage East as a short cut to Romance is a complete falsification of spinster novelists. That kind of adventure is much more accessible in Glasgow than under desert palms.

But in Cairo the soldier did find good and fairly cheap amusement—good cinemas, café terraces where life unrolled colourfully over a glass of beer, plenty of army-organised football by exotically-titled teams such as "Benghazi Wanderers" and "Tobruk United," and a feeling in the air of relaxation and, yes, luxury that was mighty pleasant when you'd been sleeping on the sand. Every one grumbled about home leave being impossible. But I often wondered whether men would really have enjoyed themselves as much with rationing and the black-out at home as they did on short leave in Cairo. And I rather fancy that when they get back to the sort of life that will be inevitable in England for a few years after the war, they will look back with affection on Cairo—even on the maddening little 'Baksheesh' boys and the vendors of fly-whisks and Feethy Peectures.

Cairo in this war was intrinsically the same Fleshpot as it appeared to the eyes of Colonel Lawrence in the last one. At school in those days, I received vivid impressions of it from my

parents, who were both there at the time. My father was in the Arab Bureau under Allenby : T. E. Lawrence worked his part of Arabia and my father his, which was the Yemen. Gezireh and Mena House were fashionable then as now. The same wheeling hawks screeched above the city, the terrace of Shepherd's looked just the same under an earlier coat of paint, the identical gharry drivers called horrible imprecations involving the byblows of camels upon each other's heads. My elder brother, returning as a colonel in 1940, had his bedroll carried upstairs by a rascally *safragi* who remembered him there as a subaltern in 1918.

Then, as now, a smart war correspondent contemplated calling his book *While Shepherds' Watched*, and the inside of that faded but characterful hostelry inspired Norman MacOwan to write that excellent play, *The Infinite Shoeblick*, which, in the Twenties, gave me so vivid a picture of Cairo that when I arrived there in the Forties, I was not a bit surprised over anything I saw.

To get my first real taste of Cairo after being in Tobruk was to appreciate it to the full. To begin with, candour forces me to say, I rather wallowed in it all. There is that in the social temperature of Egypt which can demoralise the stoutest fibre. Firm Marxist though I am, I confess I found it fascinating to live, even briefly, in a country run by a feudal landed aristocracy. It was rather like being translated to Versailles before the Revolution and, with Talleyrand, feeling that no one who had not lived in France before 1789 had really lived at all.

For of course feudal aristocracies are remarkably pleasant places—provided one has a slight astigmatism and is oneself a feudal lord. It is very pleasant to be waited upon by faultless Sudanese servants, to employ a cook who will produce on two aged primus stoves a meal which a whole English domestic staff could not manage upon an Aga Cooker. It must be pleasant, if one is an Egyptian, to own say one hundred acres of the fine cotton land of the Delta which, let out to the *fellah* at £25 per acre, will bring one £2500 a year without lifting one's hand. It is pleasant to pay £8 a month for a well-built modern flat in a good part of Cairo, to have a tent near the Pyramids where one can drive out to dine, taking one's own servants, or stay the night in the chill desert air when the heat of Cairo becomes insufferable.

It is pleasant to have a beach-house at Sidi Bish in Alexandria where the swimming is so far superior to the Riviera as are Saunton Sands to Wigan Pier. It is pleasant to pay hardly any taxes and to have access to all the exported luxuries of Britain, America and neutral Europe which the people of those countries themselves can no longer buy.

There is great wealth in Egypt, wealth in the land itself which gives three crops a year, and it is the men who control that land—not so much the Greek merchants or Levantine restaurateurs who *appear* so prosperous—who rule the country. Under Islam there is a sort of rough fraternity, at least among men, which at times *looks* almost like democracy: it has always enabled a select few among the poor to rise into the seats of the mighty, permitting slaves to become kings and peasants like Nahas Pasha to become Prime Minister. But note the *Pasha* . . . the poor boy becomes a lord for life and a whole cabinet of once radical Nationalists accept honours from the King which divorce them utterly from the illiterate millions they represent. Not for nothing, perhaps, is the Egyptian political system modelled upon that of England!

While I was in Egypt Nahas caused a sensation by introducing a bill to make it illegal for any peasant to be paid less than one shilling for a full day's work. It was generally agreed that the measure could never be enforced. But despite the appalling poverty of the *fellah*, which every one deplores but which no one ever does anything about, there is scarcely a spark of social conscience in Egypt. In a country which economically is ripe for revolution, where heads might well be expected to fall like nine-pins, there is not one *known* Communist and scarcely a Socialist of note. Parliament is packed with pashas and beys, landowners and wealthy lawyers. Over fifteen million peasants jammed into the richest and one of the most overcrowded bits of territory in the world, are politically dumb. The oppressed have grown to love their chains and it is possible to live the life of an eighteenth-century seigneur in Egypt without a single induced pang of conscience: the serfs themselves would be the last to reproach you with their servitude.

In my first few days back from Tobruk I experienced more real gaiety than I had known since the world's sky began to

darken with the War in Spain. I dined on the roof of the Continental with two pretty Egyptian girls and Patrick Crosse, a pleasant young Reuter war reporter, who was soon after taken prisoner in the desert: an alert sounded during dinner and searchlights swept the glowing starlit sky but so feeble were their thrusts in the light of a great orange moon, that they could not have picked out any raiders had any shown up, and none did. I lunched with J. L. Hodson, whom I had known in France: his north-country pawkiness was a bit on edge at the sight of so much ease displayed in war-time and after an almost Parisian meal, he stood up amongst the natives in a tram to ease his conscience.

I danced in the garden at Shepherd's, took in the cabaret at Madame Badia's with its be vies of Tummy Dancers who take their art seriously, as do their patrons, for this formalised rotation of the Belly has been the ballet of the East since the time of Herod's daughter and its classic forms must not be departed from: I dined at a little open-air restaurant by the Nile where only pigeons are served and gave a dinner at Mena House for Randolph Churchill who, as a major, had taken over the propaganda side of the Army's Public Relations in the Middle East—and was making a very good job of it. Present also was Colonel Philip Astley, in charge of all war correspondents in the Desert, whom I shall *not* describe as has frequently and illogically been the case as "Madeleine Carroll's former husband." Philip Astley can stand on his own feet in this war as the bland and efficient organiser of a thankless task, the "Thomas Cook" who for three years arranged all the machinery which enabled the correspondents to tell the world day by day how the war was going. Whatever its quality, the reporting of the Desert War required an amount of organisation which has not been equalled on any other front—quantities of transport, food, supplies and aeroplanes had to be laid on to enable this work to be done and for the efficient discharge of all this Astley must get the credit. I often cursed his organisation at the time, but on other war fronts since, I have looked back upon it as a model of its kind.

About Randolph Churchill I share a common inability to make up my mind.

His is a combative nature. He is far from modest and his

manners are not winning. But nor were Winston's when he was young. I once met an old man who knew Winston as a young soldier. "Cocksure young upstart," he said of him, "he was always boasting he'd be a great man but at that time none of us thought he'd ever equal Lord Randolph."

It is a very difficult job to be a Prime Minister's son. I have met two other Prime Minister's sons, Anthony Asquith and Malcolm Macdonald, and I found that they were so anxious not to be thought to be deriving any advantage from their birth, that they must often have stood in the way of their own advancement.

Randolph Churchill, however, has no such bourgeois inhibitions. He is unambiguously delighted to be heir to one of the great men of the Age; interlards his conversation with, "Father says this" and "Father likes that," and appears (perhaps sensibly) to have decided that since almost every one will be warmly disposed towards him because he is his father's son, it would be hypocritical to pretend that the position is not both pleasant and advantageous.

At the same time, he must have to contend with a very real natural diffidence. It must be difficult for even the most assured of young men to believe that Nature is going to perform a hat-trick on his behalf by permitting a man of great ability (Lord Randolph) to father a man of genius (Winston) who in turn produces an offspring of ascending, or even equal merit (Randolph junior). He must have the feeling that no matter how great his own ability, no matter how strenuously he applies it, the mathematical law of averages has been against him from birth and that the world is almost certain to rate him inferior to his forebears.

This being the case, one would have thought instinct would have dictated a breaking-away from family tradition. (Anthony Asquith, who would have made a second-rate politician, has become a sound cinematographer in his own right.) But Randolph was a Tory politician at twenty-two and I feel with Clemenceau that there must be something radically wrong with a man who is not a Socialist before he is thirty. A Tory politician in a safe Tory seat, just like his father, when he might have put a Churchill into the Communist Party and kept his family abreast with the times!

Randolph is a man of parts, an entertaining conversationalist, a man of no mean administrative ability, a cutter of red tape and a 'go-getter' for his side, as he proved whilst in charge of propaganda in the Middle East. His energy in insisting that the men not only got the news of the world in the Desert but also intelligence summaries of news that could not be publicly printed in Egypt, and that the troops should hear both sides of a political question and should retain their rights of free political choice and debate as citizen-soldiers (which some generals in Egypt wished to deny them) earned him the hatred of many Brass-Hats who would ordinarily have curried favour with a Premier's son and when an outcry arose in Parliament over the over-optimistic predictions of the "Cairo spokesman," Randolph was made the goat.

The responsibility of course lay with the Military Intelligence, but Winston was personally attacked because one or two of the over-sanguine statements which were being made at the time by various officials were traced down to his own son, and Randolph was removed.

Randolph is a competent journalist ; he had done his job well and we all missed him when he went. Personally, I found him likeable though 'difficult' and felt that if only he would change his politics, a high place would have to be built to enclose his talents. But what future can there be after the war for a young man who has the grave defect of being very well satisfied with the world as it was before Hitler gave it the *coup de grace* ?

To convey adequately the temperature of Cairo during the years of the Desert War would require an impressionistic skill greater than mine, and more space than is available here. Thousands of returning soldiers will have always with them the memory of Sharia Kasr el Nil on a spring morning with the dirty yellow vehicles fresh in from the desert intermingled with the glossy Cadillacs from Kasr el Doubara and the smell of sweating horseflesh alternating with the rich odours of the perfume shops as one passed before the elegant shop windows ; of the young men in torn uniforms with the sand sweated into skin and hair until they looked bright yellow, demanding a bath and a bed on the steps of a hotel ; of the sinuous Greek and Syrian women sunning

themselves on the terraces, wearing diamond rings as big as walnuts and giving the impression that the desert was some remote, vulgar place with which they had nothing to do, even when slumming.

In winter there were two race meetings a week and in summer swimming and cricket at Gezireh, with strawberry ices handed round on trays and a band playing the hits of last war's musical comedies. For one "international" match, men were actually brought down from the desert to play. There were the same jokes in this war as in last about the "Gezireh Hussars" and "Groppi's Horse" (Groppi is a big pastry-cook and his horsemen were those staff wallahs whose duties tied them to Cairo). I knew personally two staff officers who had never even seen the desert, except from an aeroplane over Alexandria, but I do not know that it was their fault. But Freddie Salusbury, the sardonic correspondent of the *Daily Herald*, who once, between jobs, had been a photographic model for gent's clothing and was perhaps the best-dressed man in Cairo, wrote a witty Christmas pantomime about the natty gentlemen who would die in the last ditch of the Gezireh 'box' if need be, but meanwhile, were resolved never to get a grain of sand on the uniform. (The irony was that if Rommel had broken through from Alamein, they would have had to do just that, for trenches were dug at Mena House and it was decided to hold Cairo to the last).

Some of these exotic ones were quite witty in their own defence, it must be owned. Captain Plevins of the Guards, whose duties had kept him a great deal in Cairo, got many a laugh when he first went to the desert by mistaking the ventilators over the sandy dug-outs at G.H.Q. at Bagush for beehives and exclaiming: "What, bees in the desert? Good show—honey for the Troops!" And again when bombed by some Stukas near the front, he quipped: "Why go any closer? One can see this sort of thing much more comfortably on the Movies."

Humour in the desert was definitely of the unheroic "I'm scared-stiff-and-I-Wanna-Go Home" variety, and Plevins scored such a success in this *genre* that the hill near Ruweisat where Auchinleck finally had his H.Q. when he took over from Ritchie in the days of crisis came to be known as 'Plevins's Bluff.' Not

many men thus gain topographical immortality. A more distinguished exception was General "Strafer" Gott, who would have commanded the 8th Army instead of Montgomery had he not tragically been killed in an air crash. He gave his name to "Strafers' Wadi."

Cairo was always full of gaudy young officers of fancy regiments on leave. They, and some of the Dominion troops, whose hobby was detaching the gharry horses from their shafts and running races with them around the Metropolitan Hotel at one o'clock in the morning, were responsible for giving the town a 'playboy' atmosphere which it did not truly deserve. Cairo was a great leave town: it was meant to be a place where the soldier could relax. But sometimes the atmosphere became just a little too relaxing and one could have wished that the Military Police had been both stricter and more numerous. The odd opinion got about that a Democratic Army positively *owed* itself the duty of being undisciplined. And when the Red Army began its victorious march back this viewpoint was intensified although if brawlers in the streets of Cairo assumed that Red Army men would have been permitted such licence they would, as I discovered when I went to Russia, have soon received a rude surprise. (Discipline in the Red Army is iron-tight, and I never imagined an army of occupation could behave with such rigid self-control as did the Russian Army in Persia.)

The gaudy young officers (they knew how to die ~~but~~ not how to fight and survive, and as survival is the first law of the desert and mere courage insufficient there, they had to receive a thorough remodelling before they were fit to fight with the really crack units like the Long Range Desert Group of the Seventh Armoured Division) . . . these gaudy young officers gave Cairo a musical comedy air at times with their improvised uniforms, their long hair and brilliant side-caps.

A certain Captain Wynn of my acquaintance, having bet that there were so many queer regiments in Cairo that one might easily pass oneself off as an officer of an entirely fictitious one, went into a hatter's and ordered a side-cap of truly Harlequin fashion to be made. It contained all the colours of the rainbow and when the dubious Levantine shopkeeper said: "May I ask *what* this is,



sir, we've nothing like this on our list . . ." Wynn replied airily, "Oh, it's Wynn's Irregulars, didn't you know?"

He wore the abortion for a couple of days in Cairo without being pulled up, and then, in the evening, an elderly 'dug-out' major from India saw its glaring colours reposing on a bar and asked, "What regiment you in, me boy?"

Fearing the game was up, Wynn slurred out the answer, "Wynn's Irregulars, sir," whereupon the old war-house snorted, "Windsor Regulars, eh? Fine yeomanry regiment . . . no idea you were out here . . . good show."

To those of us who had long expected this war, who felt we had been born for it, as Grenfell and Sassoon were born for 1914, the Western Desert, when we came upon it, seemed to us the very consummation of our young lives—the ash-heap into which twenty years of steady Decline in the West had logically led us.

The Desert was the *Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot, with illustrations by Salvador Dali. In it Nature imitated Art with an extraordinary fidelity: the whole Surrealist School might have moved into the desert as official war artists and gone on painting their peace-time subjects—crumbling columns, piles of junk, the bones of dead animals against dramatic distances of sand and sky—uninterruptedly.

If our world of pseudo-democracy was going to end here, one could be sure it would end not with a bang but a whimper. Nothing went with a bang in the desert. The slow, difficult campaigns back and forth over three years without any decision being reached, the prodigious service of supply which eat up the energies of over a million men who might, but for Italy's treachery against France, have been used in a campaign in Europe; all this established the desert as a running sore on the war effort of all the United Nations. Not only men were wasted or immobilised here but aircraft which might have been sent from America to China, tanks which might have been landed on the continent in direct support of the Red Army, shipping which might have enabled us to rush enough troops east to hold Burma, or even Singapore, all these were poured forth to enable first Wavell then Auchinleck and, for a time, Alexander not to wage war decisively but merely

with great difficulty to stave off the fall of the Suez Canal. If ever a policy of military activity on a 'secondary' front was justified Hitler's use of two armoured divisions, one motorised, and one of infantry to keep this Libyan war running on was justified up to the hilt.

At first it made me mad to hear complacent voices boasting of how many Axis troops we were "tying up in Africa." The boot was on the other leg. A great British and Dominion army which might have been available for a real second front was being pinned down in Africa.

But the Libyan Desert was the ideal terrain for war. Would that the whole issue might have been fought out between Tripoli and the Nile, sparing fragile Europe the awful destruction that has befallen it. The desert could take any amount of punishment and come up sunny and smiling. No cathedrals or art galleries to attract bombs—nothing but a few shoddy Fascist settlements in concrete to mar its immense emptiness. It used to give me a thrill of mingled horror and pleasure to stand on that bluff behind the Pyramids and, looking westward, reflect that one might travel more than three thousand miles in that direction and encounter never a blade of grass nor a living thing until one struck the Atlantic Ocean, south of Morocco.

Could I but make the Desert live on paper for those who have not seen it, I would consider myself something of a genius. It would seem easy at first sight to describe anything so featureless as a desert, but the evidence of the troops themselves who lived in it is that it must be one of the hardest things in the world for, although millions of words had been written on the desert by the time I got there in September, 1941, and although soldiers had been describing it in their letters home, most people at home still seemed unable to visualise it.

"My wife seems to think I wear a topee and lie under a mosquito net all day long," a bombardier told me when I first reached camp at Bagush.

"My fiancée seems to think the place is full of beautiful Bedouin girls on camels," a rifleman complained.

"Last winter, when we were freezing in the icy rain near Benghazi, my young engineer-brother wrote suggesting a method

of constructing a home-made refrigerator for icing drinks," a tank sergeant declared.

In truth, nobody wore topees, mosquitoes were hardly ever encountered, there were no Bedouin, no camels, and in winter the desert was about as cold a place as Salisbury Plain in winter. But on Salisbury Plain you don't have to sleep on the ground in the open.

The Libyan Desert can in season be all things to all men—hot and cold, damp and dry, monotonous and variegated, utterly barren and covered in scrub, succulent enough to feed camels, goats and even sheep. One wadi might contain nothing but a hideous jumble of old tin cans. The adjoining wadi might be full of desert flowers which bloom in the dew, die as soon as the sun rises.

In general the Salisbury Plain simile is not bad. The desert mostly resembles a vast, gently undulating heath with low shrubs upon it, but without a blade of grass. Were Salisbury Plain made of sand and were it 600 miles long, it would definitely be like the Western Desert. But rule out any idea of trees . . . Between Alexandria and Hellfire Pass along the coast there are about three groves of palms, but in the desert inland, precisely one palm tree. Not far from Alamein, it is marked on the map, "El Whiska."

The Desert is entirely unpictorial. There is no colour in it. Photographs taken in its clear air are net, but lack character: there is no shadow, no light and shade. There are no landmarks and you can motor over hundreds of miles of it without remembering afterwards a single distinctive feature.

There are a few exceptions, notably that sector near Burg el Arab where General Montgomery was to have his headquarters before Alamein, which any one can visualise because it is precisely what Hollywood would make of it if (and one feels sure it won't be long now) the Big Boys decide to do a film about the Desert War. No barren landscape here but, on the contrary, every suitable ingredient for a film drama of the *Beau Geste* kind—a fort fast falling into decay, with lizards running along its walls, an oasis nearby with tall palms waving and around it scores of Bedouin tents.

Libya itself was denuded of Bedouin. You never saw an Arab there. Sensibly, the Senussi had evacuated themselves into Egypt to permit the white men to fight it out between themselves. At first I thought I ought not to go to the desert without learning a few words of Arabic, but I would have wasted my time for between Mersah and Derna not one word of Arabic was spoken. English and German were the ruling languages, and save for a few camels left behind and a few sheiks' tombs, consisting of a heap of stones mournfully marked with white flags, not a vestige of Arab life remained. But this Hollywood stretch of desert had everything—Bedouin squatting outside their tents kneading their bread, tethered camels cropping the desert thorn, goats being herded by naked infants from one patch of bush to another, Arab women in black robes walking in line to the well with discarded British petrol tins on their heads instead of the traditional water pitcher, and Arab maidens in their rusty red gowns and heavy silver bangles about their ankles running barefoot in the dust, playing a variant of that Hop Scotch game they play in the streets of London.

And quite cinematically this rich Bedouin life went on side by side with that of the British Army at war. Having fled from near the frontier, where the enemy were, towards the Delta without entering the Delta itself (where the Fellaheen would not make them welcome), the Bedouin were concentrated in a small area. Their tents were pitched close to British Army vehicles and while the Tommies made do with a small bivvy tent or a hole dug in the sand of a night and officers slept on their camp beds under the stars, these Arabs bedded down comfortably inside their portable homes, which were shaped like the lids of so many entrée dishes and made of skins of heavy cotton sheeting. By day they muscled in on the war effort to the extent of selling eggs and goat cheese to the troops. Some walked considerable distances to trade in outlying camps.

On my first day at Bagush, whilst sitting naked on a rock between swims without a living being in sight, I saw approaching from the far distance across the sand a white-robed Arab figure. It took him about a quarter of an hour to draw nigh until at last he approached me and, quite unabashed by my Robinson Crusoe

posture, held out a scrawny hand in which lay a minute object wrapped in an old newspaper.

"You buy nice scarab, captain?" he inquired.

Wing-Commander Houghton, who was Air Vice-Marshal Conyngham's Public Relations Officer, and a real old Desert hand, told me he had a similar experience one morning when seated in a place of retirement. A brown hand slid over the top of the canvas and an oily voice invited him to buy the single egg which was clutched therein—"Ver' cheap—only two piastres."

Yes, in that Hollywood desert at Burg el Arab one had only to half-close the eyes to see Errol Flynn standing outside that tent, squaring his shoulders against the dawn sky, thwacking a cane against highly-polished riding-boots. And it would not have been difficult to fit in some love interest . . . a nurse from the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit, say, or some American newspaper woman visiting the front. But of course el Arab was no more typical of the Desert as a whole than Hollywood typifies the state of California. It would, however, have been something for the folks at home to sink their imaginative teeth into. The real desert beggars description. Let's leave it at that. But this unreal desert was just what Everyman's imagination would say a genuine desert ought to be.

Instead of struggling to picture their loved ones in a limbo of sand and flies it would have been much easier for the home folks to visualise them in this winsome Metrogoldwynland. And they would not have gone far wrong: for the place was like Piccadilly Circus. Sooner or later every one passed that way.

The real Piccadilly Circus was out in the desert south of Sidi Barrani. There, at a lonely track junction where a signpost indicated "Charing Cross" one way and "Regent Street" another, some artistic soul, grieving over the removal of Eros from his old beat by Swan and Edgar's, had resuscitated him, complete with bow and arrow, out of old petrol tins and mounted him upon a cairn of stones. The statue caught the flash of the sun and was visible a long way off.

This was the time of the Birth of the Blue. The old original 'Desert Rats,' the men of General Hobart's 'Mobile Division,'

which later became the famous Seventh Armoured Division, had begun calling the Desert 'the Blue' when they manœuvred there as far back as 1937. But when I came to Bagush after a year of full war had already flowed up to Agedabia and back to the frontier, the term was getting into general use. With its use, the legend of the Desert began to grow, spread by men who had served there on to other fronts and into many parts of the world so that it may be that although the scale of fighting in Libya was so much less than in Russia, the spirit of the Desert may take as high a place in the final history of this global war as the legend of Stalingrad.

If this is so it will be largely due to the resilience of spirit that enabled the old Desert hands to serve there year after year without going crazy and to pass on their lore to the 'new boys' as they came out from home. Without a hard core of old desert rats, the comparatively new Eighth Army which won final victory at Alamein and Montgomery himself (*he* was certainly a new boy) would not have enjoyed their triumph.

Looking back over my notebooks I find that in August, 1942, I went out searching near Alamein for "the oldest inhabitant of the Western Desert." As a unit the Eleventh Hussars may have been it. I did not find one indisputable record-holder, but I did find three who must have been very near the mark.

None 'old sweats' but all young and unmarried. As their colonel said, "The desert's like Heaven—there's no marrying or giving in marriage." The oldest was Corporal William Finch, of 117 Warley Hill, Brentwood, Essex, who was aged eighteen when in 1938 he first came to the desert where in 1940-41 he did eleven months right off, without a day's leave. Next came Sergeant Archibald Moore, of 39 Nichol Lane, Bromley, Kent, aged twenty-six, who first saw Alamein in 1937 when he went on manœuvres from there across the desert, simulating an attack upon Cairo which Rommel almost emulated in July, 1942. Except for a brief spell in Palestine, he had been in the desert almost without interruption ever since. The third was Sergeant Leonard Burritt, aged twenty-four, of Fiefield House, near Maidenhead, Berkshire, who arrived in Egypt in 1937 and, at the Munich crisis, went to the desert where he remained on manœuvres for

four months until Christmas, 1938. All three belonged to the Signals H.Q. of the Seventh Armoured Division.

In September, 1941, the desert headquarters of the Army of the Nile and of the Desert Air Force were at Bagush, a place which Air Vice-Marshal Conyngham afterwards told me he could not have improved upon had he been looking for a health resort. That was just what Bagush was. The escarpment here ran a mile or two from the Mediterranean, some 35 miles east of Mersah Matruh, and sloped down towards a few palms which a herd of milk-white camels seemed to have appropriated for themselves. The swimming was superb. The headquarters was so well dug into the sand that it can hardly have shown from the air. The macadam road down to it was always kept sanded over and the only time the place was bombed was when this sand blew off, revealing to the enemy reconnaissance that something important lay at the road's end.

The war correspondents and war artists lived in a cluster of tents near the sea and had their own mess, of which the president at that time was a Captain Reuben, whose regime won fame from Alexandria to Hellfire. So firmly did the gallant captain believe in the old soldiers' maxim, "A soldier should make himself as comfortable in the field as circumstances permit," that he became known as "Baron Reuben of Bagush." His tents were well dug down and sandbagged to keep out the wintry blast, his mess tent had electric light in it and, adjoining it, through a sandbagged tunnel, was a recreation tent of Surrealist inspiration with a bar and sofas constructed entirely of sandbags which afforded cosy nests for field-mice but were also quite comfortable for humans. His dinners consisted of four courses and those who arrived "improperly dressed" were invariably rebuked; his cellar would not have been scorned by a London club in wartime; the Australian beer was good, there was Italian chianti from Alexandria, cheroots from India, and even such delicacies as Kummel and Drambuie. An inn sign bearing the 'all-seeing eye' of Public Relations swung in the breeze: when Cecil Beaton visited us sometime later he painted an even better one.

Up the desert track was a native bazaar housed in a small tent where onions, tomatoes and eggs could be procured. This camp

was of course a base. One sallied forth from it to go up to the front but, in those queer months of lull before Auchinleck's offensive began, even trips to the front need not be uncomfortable. Indeed, Captain Vivian Ward, an old white hunter from Kenya, habitually set off for the frontier with three dozen fresh eggs in his truck so that he might have his accustomed eggs and bacon when rising in the desert. Some of the frontline troops lived equally well: with a Guards regiment near Sofafi I actually ate chicken, washed down by French brandy. Fresh meat was fairly plentiful in the desert at this time and the morning paper, flown up from Cairo, was on many a sandy breakfast-table.

My first delight at Bagush was the lagoon, than which I have never seen a lovelier anywhere in the world. No matter how rough the water beyond the encircling rocks, the lagoon was always smooth. It was quarter of a mile wide—a tempting distance for the average swimmer. Cannes or Palm Beach has nothing to compare with this glorious beach. And with Baron Reuben's holiday camp behind one, one might well have felt that so long as both armies kept watching each other across the frontier, this tortured world offered few fairer prospects than a period of beachcombing at Bagush.

The troops came down to the sea from the upland as often as they could, and I don't suppose the English soldiers had ever felt themselves so healthy in their lives as they did then. I certainly felt more vigorous than I had done since I was a boy. The bright, brilliant days, the chill nights, the constant immersing of one's naked body in the sea produced a feeling of well-being that perhaps only a ski-ing holiday in pre-war Switzerland could have equalled. One saw men who appeared to be bursting with health and vitality.

One afternoon I saw two Yorkshiremen wrestling on the beach. As their bodies, tanned to a uniform golden brown, swayed together against the lighter gold of the sand and the opalescent sea, they looked like two figures on a Greek vase. Sweethearts seeing them thus could never again have preferred Robert Taylor. When Leeds claims you back after the war, I thought, you will regret these moments, though you may curse them now. Many men were happy in the desert without knowing it. It was



*supposed* to be a hell-hole so you felt that to admit well-being in it was to label yourself 'queer.' I stayed there four months without a break on first going there, which at that time was thought to be pretty solid for a fliberty-gibbet war correspondent, but my little record was soon broken by Richard Capell, well over fifty and sometime music critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, who attached himself to R.A.F. squadrons in turn and lived more consistently in the desert than the pilots did themselves. He confessed himself enchanted with desert life, which suited his austere temperament. He became known as "Scorpion Joe."

Awaiting transport to the front, I spent more time in the lagoon than out of it. Afloat like a crocodile, with only my nose sticking out, becoming a part of the briny, I revived youthful morbidities about being destined to drown at sea, only now there seemed to be nothing morbid about it. Was not the body ninety per cent water? Then Dust to Dust was not fitting but rather, Water unto Water, and if at the end one added one's small puddle to the totality of the delicious stuff in which one now timelessly drifted, then that would constitute a small, if inadequate Thank You for present enjoyment.

We knew that Auchinleck's offensive could not be far ahead : one sign was the arrival of a contingent of South African nurses at Matruh—the first women who had ever been seen in the desert. They were greeted by mobs of smiling, respectful soldiery. But they weren't there just to keep up morale : hospital trains followed them up the desert railway, which had been extended up to the frontier, and we knew what this meant. So I hastened to make myself as familiar with the desert as the short period of grace before me might permit. I went around the Buq-Buq and Barrani areas pretty thoroughly and cruised around south and west of Sofafi. Here everything was ominously quiet. The only novelty was the use by the Germans of firemen's ladders as observation posts—a good example of clever improvisation by Rommel. The long expanding ladders taken from fire brigades in the Fatherland, could be towed out into the blue and run up in no time, enabling an observer to shin up it and have a good look over our positions and get the contraption rolled down again and away, before our guns could get his range.

As I passed through Matruh on my way up I ran into a score of Anzacs who had just escaped from Crete to Greece, where they had actually lived for two months in the mountains, sheltered by and disguised as peasants, before they got a caique and set sail for Africa. I asked them why they had not sailed for Africa in the first place and they said, "The boatman didn't want to go that way : he was going home." They landed in Greece quite unobserved and left in the same fashion. They said over 800 of our men were still living in the hills of Crete undisturbed by the German garrison, and that their experience showed that it was comparatively easy to land in either Crete or Greece and leave again at will. Some wanted to go back 'to do a job.' I believe these men later got their way. They nearly landed from their caique at Bardia, thinking that Wavell's men still held it, but fortunately they thought the silence there suspicious, and so turned eastward into Matruh. These were the first sizeable contingent of a long series of men who were to leave and re-enter the Balkans by the Greek back door. Even then, the Italian garrison in Greece was not on its toes.

In a roadside NAAFI with an Olde Englishe inn sign swinging outside it I met Colonel Keyes, the commando son of the then commando chief, Sir Roger Keyes, who was awarded a posthumous V.C. for his seaborne raid on Rommel's headquarters in Libya. Richard Busvine, the war correspondent, was with him and we had lunch together. We did not know it at the time, but Keyes was on his way up to do his famous Rommel raid at that moment. He was a delicate-looking man, quiet and off-hand in manner. No wonder, in view of what lay before him ! But the conversation was light and trivial. Busvine recounted how he was working on a frivolous account of the desert war called *Gullible's Travels*, then we exchanged some of the desert limericks which were then coming into vogue, of which the opening line was invariably "There was a young girl of Bagush" . . . or Daba . . . or Derna, and so on all the way between the Nile and Benghazi.

It was a pleasant meal and for a long time after I had difficulty in believing that Keyes had been killed hundreds of miles behind the German lines. After eating roast beef and Yorkshire in this

smug little inn, it just didn't seem *probable* that he had gone straight out on so wild a mission, and never come back.

In a very different style, a trip which I then made to the oases of Siwa and Jarabub did not seem real either. Siwa lies close to the Libyan frontier, some 200 miles south of the coast, and Jarabub is about 25 miles across the great Fence which Mussolini built, and which our armoured cars impudently drove over every day, inside Italian territory. Both oases were held by us and proved of great importance in the coming offensive. From here the fabulous Long Range Desert Group, which was the fruit of Colonel Bagnold's long experiments upon "Libyan Sands," operated deep into enemy territory, destroying dumps which the Italians made in the desert, raiding their desert landing-grounds and making it impossible for them ever to establish themselves in any strength in the desert interior. Siwa had inexhaustible supplies of water and dates : we could have kept a garrison there indefinitely, even if it had been cut off from the sea. The Axis, however, lacking these oases, were never able to get a real foothold in the interior with the result that all their offensives were delivered along the coast road, and there was never an element of surprise in them.

Before the war rich Americans had been wont to rattle up to Mersah Matruh in the Pullman car train and drive over the desert to Siwa—always two cars at a time, lest one should break down, and accompanied by guides who did their best to lay on 'local colour.' This was an expensive trip, not entered into by the ordinary tourist in Egypt, and here were we duplicating it in war-time as part of our jobs, with more 'local colour' thrown in than any millionaire could hope to have seen ! It was a desert safari. We covered 600 miles of bad desert going in five days, took pot-shots at antelope when we saw any, camped out in that exhilarating barren emptiness, quite self-contained in our two small trucks and, but for two Italian planes which circled disinterestedly over us, had no reminders of the war all the way.

Alan Moorehead of the *Daily Express* and Russell Hill of the *New York Herald Tribune* came with me, and our capable conducting officer was John Brooke of the Rifle Brigade. We covered 180

miles the first day and camped fifty miles outside Siwa that night. Brooke was well supplied with gin from Alexandria, and we sat round the fire singing songs and having political arguments in which our R.A.S.C. drivers joined. Brooke took exception to my Left Wing views to which, he said, he would never become converted even if I got up and expounded them from a soap-box. Thus challenged, I took a soap-box that had contained bully out of the truck and, mounting it, proceeded to deliver an oration so impassioned that it would, I am persuaded, have undermined the principles of Winston Churchill himself ; but, unfortunately, the company resumed their singing before it had fairly begun, so that my silver-tongued sweetness was truly wasted on the desert air. However, I then sang for the first time a ditty which was destined to become a part of many soldiers' desert experience. For this I must disclaim all personal credit : I had been taught it by the barmaid on the ship coming out. But in all those desert years there were three great theme songs of the blue. The first, alas, was Boche. " Lili Marleen," with a wonderful swing to it, came over the German radio every night and our men formed the habit of listening-in. The second, sung to a tune of Verdi's, commemorated the capture of some Italian generals and lauded the surprising cheapness of certain fundamentals. I can say no more. It was quite unprintable.

But the third—ah, the third !—was my little Cockney patter song, and for justification of my boasting I refer you to an official War Office publication on the Auchinleck campaign, *They Sought Out Rommel*, by Captain (now Lieut.-Colonel) Sean Fielding (H.M. Stationery Office, 7d.), which gives it its due. Here is the ignoble refrain :

" Ahtside a lunatic asylum  
I 'ad a job pickin' up stones  
When aht pops a lunatic an' sez ter me :  
' Good morning, Mister Jones.  
' Ah much a week do yer git fer doin' that ? '  
' Thirty bob a week,' sez I.  
So he shakes 'is 'ead and winks 'is eye  
And this is his reply :

“ ‘ Come inside, yer silly B——, come inside !  
‘ I thought yew ’ad more sense ;  
‘ Werkin’ fer yer livin’ ?  
‘ Take my tip ;  
‘ Act damn’ silly  
‘ And become a Lunatic :  
‘ ’Cos you gets your meals reg’lar  
‘ An’ two new suits beside.  
‘ Thirty bob a week ? Six kids ter keep ?  
‘ Come inside, yer silly B——, come inside ! ’ ”

The next morning we went on into Siwa, running downhill off the desert through rose-pink canyons until suddenly the sand gave place to palms and water courses and a large mud village built upon a hill, surmounted by an ancient minaret. This was Siwa, the last bit of Arab civilisation on the north boundary of the Sand Sea, the impassible sand mass with waves thirty feet high which runs into the Sahara and protects Egypt from invasion from the West.

We went swimming in Cleopatra’s Pool—a round tank fed by springs from beneath, inspected the few broken columns which were once the temple of Amon-Ra, and erected our mosquito nets (the place is terribly malarial) in a broken-down rest-house. The British troops in the place had come down from the desert and were revelling in the greenery and freshness of it all—all but one man, who disgustedly showed us a box of dates he had brought from a NAAFI in Cairo which had written upon it, “ Product of Jones and Co. (a London firm) : these dates were grown in Siwa Oasis.” And looking up at the palms, he gazed at hundreds of golden clusters which had not yet taken this highly circuitous route to his stomach.

Men of the Long Range Desert Group were about in their queer short-wheel base desert cars, and their extraordinary uniforms—British below the waist but mostly Arab above it, including the long *burnous*. We visited their headquarters and they told us how they had recently ranged far beyond Benghazi, operating actually as far west as the Gulf of Sirte.

If the Axis had ever had anything comparable to the L.R.D.G.

(in 1942 they did try to copy it, when they were occupying Siwa) they would have had patrols in the suburbs of Cairo. But geography is all in Egypt's favour, for not only the sand sea but also the Kattara Depression stands between Siwa and the Nile, whereas in the opposite direction there are no natural obstacles between Siwa and Tunisia. Some of them told us of dreamlike stretches of gravel desert towards Jalo Oasis, which the Italians held, on which one could make 60 miles an hour. So they not only ranged far but very fast into the enemy's back areas. Usually they avoided combat: their aim was reconnaissance. But at night they would do raids. Once they joined an enemy convoy along the coast road near Benghazi: if challenged by the Germans, they spoke Italian: if stopped by the Italians, they haughtily pretended to be Germans. A favourite dodge was to drive along an enemy road at night sowing mines behind them. The information these men brought back was worth a couple of divisions to us. And in planting and bringing back spies they were also invaluable.

Next day we drove over Mussolini's ruined wire fence into Libya. Our destination was the oasis of Jarabub, holy village of the Senussi sect. At first the going was villainous: we were blocked by soft sand or precipitous rocky outcrops every ten minutes, but after doing some forty miles, digging ourselves out repeatedly in the broiling sun, we came to the top of a sandhill and saw before us what looked like a first-class road. A mirage, surely? But no, Auchinleck's plan of campaign was to invade Libya simultaneously at many points between the sea and Siwa and to keep the advance bases in Siwa and Jarabub supplied for the southermost thrust, roads were essential. South African road engineers armed with bulldozers were put on the job and ironed out sand roads as they ironed out desert aerodromes.

From the salt lakes at Melfa Oasis, near Jarabub, water-carts brought water to spray on the sand, which was then pressed down into a sort of light concrete. The result was a wonderful surface which would hold for some weeks under heavy traffic—long enough for the offensive to get under way.

The tomb of the Senussi at Jarabub is a charming, squat mosque with a white cloister around it. Blue and gold and green

faience decorates the interior, and the tomb itself glows behind gilded bars. Indian Muslim soldiers were guarding it and we removed our shoes before entering. The carpets and materials to build this mosque must have been carried hundreds of miles over the desert by camel. The village nearby was deserted : the mosque stood alone in its discreet magnificence, a fitting memorial to a great Puritan who had withdrawn to the desert as the Hebrew prophets withdrew to the wilderness, to re-discover themselves. Part of the cloister had been broken by Italian bombing and by shell-fire when the place had been fought over.

The headquarters of an Indian Brigade was nearby, and the brigadier invited us to spend the night in his camp. How well these Indian Army men do themselves in the wilds ! We were a considerable distance inside enemy territory and might at any moment be attacked, but we ate a good meal out of tins in a tent and were offered a bath in a canvas tub beforehand, with real hot water prepared in petrol cans over a great fire. Every jot of food and equipment these men had had been carried over 200 miles from railhead across the vilest desert imaginable, but Auchinleck's offensive was stoking up fast—every day sixty ten-ton trucks made the trek to Siwa—600 tons of material daily for this one outpost alone.

Next day we visited the South African armoured cars at Melfa and swam with them in the great salt lake. The scenery was wildly beautiful with its pinkish hills and purple-shadowed waddies, but I have never seen more flies. Every man wielded a fly-whisk in one hand to keep the brutes from swarming on the food which he conveyed to his mouth with the other. The buzzing of the insects made a continuous row : a piece of bread dropped became a mass of black filth in a second. Consequently, there was dysentery : they just could not keep it down.

We pulled up on to the escarpment to pass the night, and next day started off on a compass bearing of 74 degrees over open desert in an effort to hit Bir Fuad petrol point, a tiny tent half-way on the track between Siwa and Mersah Matruh. Our petrol was running low, though we had replenished with water at Siwa.

John Brooke did a fine piece of navigation : not long ago he had been learning compass-work on Salisbury Plain. I learnt

after that this was his first big effort to travel without any markers on the desert. Holding his compass in his lap in the front seat and directing the driver the whole time . . . "a little more to the right . . . a spot to the left" . . . he kept us on a true course for 60 miles, despite deep wadies which had to be circum-navigated (and allowance duly made therefore in his calculations) and just when one car was coughing and spitting with its petrol running out, hit Bir Fuad squarely on the chin. One car had to fetch petrol those last few yards for the other, which had stalled, but he had navigated precisely. A diversion of half a degree would have carried us miles wide. And it was no laughing matter to get lost, off a used track, in the Western Desert.

We drove back to Bagush through a day of Indian summer, and as we arrived the sun dropped hurriedly down behind clouds stained pink and blood-red ; then in an almond-green sky a great yellow moon glowed forth. The night was deadly still : a beautiful, quiet prelude to battle. Soon after, the ground shook with bombs dropped at dusk upon some nearby airfield.

The camp was horribly full. It was November 15th, 1941. I found Russell Hill, Dick Mowrer of the *Chicago Daily News*, and the Marquis of Ely in my small tent. Photographers were cleaning their lenses, our drivers were cleaning their tommy-guns and we our typewriters. The abortive, tragic, yet splendid Auchinleck offensive was about to begin.



## CHAPTER SIX

### THE CRUSADER OFFENSIVE

ON a Sunday evening, November 16th, 1941, the commander of the Army of the Nile, General Cunningham, received war correspondents representing the whole free world in his tent at Bagush and said, "Gentlemen, I am taking you into my confidence. At dawn on Tuesday we will advance into Libya at selected points along the whole front from the sea to Jarabub Oasis. After that, my plans depend very much on what old Rommel decides to do."

Thus, probably for the first time in military history, a general told the Press the time of his offensive thirty-six hours before it was due.

Cunningham was smiling and confident, pink-faced and healthy. He looked like a foxhunter. But the particular fox he was after proved to be wilier than he. Some ten days later, his plans having proved too dependent on "old Rommel" and his offensive being in danger of stalling completely, General Cunningham was relieved and General Ritchie succeeded him.

It is easy to look back on that evening with wisdom and pronounce General Cunningham's plan, or rather lack of planning, faulty from the start; but I do not remember any one doing so at the time. General Erwin Rommel had not then proved himself to be the consummate desert commander he afterwards showed himself to be, and General Cunningham's battle order had been approved by General Auchinleck and co-ordinated closely with the plans of the Desert Air Force under "Mary" Conyngham and those of the Fleet under the general's brother, Admiral Cunningham. On paper, the scheme must have looked good. There was no reason then to suppose it unduly adventurous, although our tank commanders in their hearts must have had their doubts about taking on German Mark three and Mark four guns with their great 75 millimetre cannon with

British tanks, none of which mounted a gun larger than a two-pounder, and with American "Honey" tanks no heavier than the 13-ton Italian machines, which we always professed to despise.

At that time we had not a single 6-pounder anti-tank gun : we used 25-pounder field-guns as anti-tank weapons, and these proved brilliantly successful when the crews had time to haul them into position and unlimber them. But the enemy outgunned us in every department except field guns : their anti-tank weapons were more numerous and heavier than ours, and their tanks, though not so numerous, had thicker protection, heavier guns and longer range. In the leaflets which we dropped on the enemy (many of which I picked up during the advance) we told them that we were advancing in overwhelming strength "with a thousand armoured vehicles," the implication being that most of these were tanks. Many were in fact armoured cars. We *did* have more tanks than the enemy, but our British Crusaders and Valentines and the American Honeys, while faster than the enemy's, were much less formidable fighting vehicles than the Mark 3's and 4's, and caught fire more easily, while the good old "Matilda" infantry tank was absolutely no match for the Germans, though its heavy armour made it a wonderful 'pill-box'—*after* it had been knocked out.

Of course America was not then in the war. We desperately needed more American supplies, and Brigadier Shearer and Randolph Churchill were emphatic that what material Washington *had* sent us ought to get a good showing in our despatches. The result was that the mechanically-excellent but quite inadequate little "Honeys" got written about in the Press of the world as though they were the finest tanks ever constructed. Nearly every one was guilty of gratefully exaggerating the value of the American material : looking back on my own despatches, I blush with shame to read that just before the battle began I wrote : "Our tanks are as good or better than the German and our crews far better." A tank commander told me, "The Panzer men may or may not have been heroes in Europe, but in the desert there's no question but that they have been anything but scintillating."

Misleading, inaccurate nonsense ! But, of course, we did not realise it then.

I find that I wrote upwards of thirty thousand words of dispatches about this Auchinleck campaign, which I followed through from start to finish, as I did Montgomery's Alamein campaign. I cannot here describe those memorable battles at the same length. But if in this book I devote more space to Alamein, let me put on record my belief that the earlier campaign represented a much greater achievement against formidable odds than did Alamein. Looking back on it now, I marvel that we ever managed to push Rommel back beyond Benghazi at all or hold him four months at Gazala when he made his spring back. We could not have done so had we not defeated Rommel's armour decisively, and this we did with tanks and anti-tank guns much inferior to his and with the additional handicap of switching our commanders and changing our plan in the midst of the campaign. Rommel clung to the coast with its good communications, whilst our attack came across waterless desert ; much of the fighting took place a long way from the sea and the enemy's continued retention of Bardia and Hellfire Pass denied us the use of the road over the frontier. General Montgomery won Alamein with two full divisions of the finest tanks America could send us plus another armoured division, including Churchills and Crusaders with big guns and an overwhelming mass of field-guns and 6-pounder anti-tank weapons, with tractored guns to challenge the German 88 millimetre guns.

I believe it no exaggeration to say that Montgomery's Eighth Army was twice as strong materially as Auchinleck's Eighth Army. So I will never be a party to throwing stones at General Auchinleck who did the best he could at a time when, after two years of war, we were still not ready to meet Germany's best equipment.

Again, I believe the student of war will find Auchinleck's campaign a more interesting one than Montgomery's. Auchinleck fought a real desert war ; fighting went on in the depths of the desert for nearly a month before Tobruk was relieved ; men were short of water and rations all the time, experienced real privation in the winter's cold, and the supply problem was far greater than

at Alamein—only 65 miles from Alexandria over a good road. Alamein was a last-war battle, a break through on a narrow front by masses of infantry who hacked a path for the tanks to follow. Once Rommel's line was broken, there followed a long pursuit over a good road all the way to Agheila and no new engagement of any consequence until Tripolitania was reached. Montgomery had no real desert fighting at all. But Auchinleck's men fought in the interior the whole time: their tanks and supply columns manœuvred there like great squadrons of vessels at sea, without roads, without a dependable supply line and frequently cut off from their dumps and bases for days at a time by enemy columns which interposed themselves between our 'front' positions and Egypt, and even raided deep into Egypt itself.

Montgomery had a neat, compact 'front' only forty miles long: Auchinleck started from a frontier 200 miles deep, but after that had no 'front' at all. It was cut and thrust and feint and parry by self-contained columns which met and beat the enemy columns and broke into enemy 'boxes' at Sidi Rezegh, Bir el Gubi, Sidi Omar and over a great triangle of desert bounded by Tobruk, Sollum and Fort Maddalena.

Montgomery fought a great fight at Alamein. It was touch and go all along: at times it scarcely seemed possible that we could afford to go on mounting great and costly infantry attacks night after night, preceded by huge artillery barrages. But Montgomery had all the material he could have asked for: he *ought* to have won, he *had* to win. I detected a consciousness of his own great responsibility, a knowledge that he simply could not fail when just before the battle he said: "Success, then failure—that's been the pattern of war in the desert and it's been disheartening for the soldiers who have been putting up with great hardships. These men need success and they deserve it. They are quite first-class. It's up to me to see that they win. I feel my responsibility is very great."

No doubt Auchinleck felt the same. But Auchinleck had no big tanks, no big guns to knock out the enemy's.

In this desert campaign the facilities to enable reporters to see the war were the best I have ever encountered, before or since.

In part this was due to the open nature of the fighting. Correspondents could get right into the middle of a battle, if they felt like it, and many did. Some got involved in battles accidentally and, in the first few days, seven reporters were taken prisoners.

If only reporters had been as free to get into the thick of it at Dunkirk, at Stalingrad and Orel—how much better our current history would have been !

We went into battle in self-contained parties. Loaded with petrol, water and hard rations for seven days I set off with Captain Sean Fielding, Matt Halton of the *Toronto Star* and Sam Brewer of the *Chicago Tribune*, with two ten-hundredweight Ford trucks (the nippiest little cars I ever saw in the desert—they could go anywhere) and a Ford station wagon, with a hole cut in the roof for a plane-spotter to put his head through and to aid in desert navigation, and a table in the rear for typing our dispatches upon.

We were 39 days in the desert until we entered Benghazi, at which time my speedometer clocked 1583 miles, of which 1200 miles had been over trackless sand. We were free to attach ourselves to any unit that would have us, and as we travelled about a great deal and our maps were well-marked, we were usually welcome guests for the information we could pass on and also, I think, because we never came down on any one for extra rations.

The adventures of our little unit were recounted, as I have said, in Sean Fielding's diary, *They Sought Out Rommel*, which was the first official publication of this campaign put out by the War Office.

During November 17th we drove as fast as we could in order to reach 13th Corps headquarters, which was right on the frontier wire near Maddalena, by nightfall. But the day was unseasonably hot and one of our cars kept boiling over, so that when night came we had to park down some way short of the wire on our own. That night the sky over Egypt was serene, over Libya blackly threatening as though prophetic of the heavy business to be enacted there on the morrow.

During the night a terrific thunderstorm broke : at first we thought it was a bombardment, but soon rain fell torrentially

from an inky sky and by dawn we were drenched to the skin, although I for one had three blankets, a sleeping bag and a ground-sheet over my camp bed. Zero hour came cold and sodden with an icy wind whistling across the waste, more like Salisbury Plain than an oriental battlefield. We huddled over a morning fire made in half an old petrol tin by pouring a little petrol into sand inside it, but a fresh downpour put out the flames, so we got on the move. As we did so athwart the lowering sky a rainbow appeared, one end of it in Egypt and the other, as it were pointing the way into Libya. From the desert airfields all around us there rose like birds with the dawn squadrons of aeroplanes, and soon the sky was full of their droning as at full throttle they streaked away westward to strafe the enemy on the ground and cover our advancing tanks and infantry with their protecting wings.

About nine o'clock the sun began to break through, but the wind increased, whipping up the sand which soon developed into a considerable sandstorm. This, however, did a good deal to hide our advance, and afforded particular protection against air attack. We came upon a forward fighter aerodrome on which a whole squadron had just alighted, but the ground staff were already loading up their gear as the whole airfield was about to move another hop forward. It was the same thing all day long, a persistent pulling-up of stakes and movement to the west. When at last we found the commander of 13th Corps, he was seated outside his tent receiving phone messages whilst the tent itself was being pulled down preliminary to pushing on. Staff officers sat inside their A.C.V.s (armoured command vehicles) receiving radio messages whilst the great vehicle, which looked so like a London bus, lumbered along across the sand. With the corps commander was the American military attaché in Egypt, Colonel Fellers, who was travelling in an ordinary Legation wagon from Cairo with its 'Corps Diplomatique' plates still on it, although by now it had become liberally camouflaged with sand. Ten American military observers took part in the advance—several actually with the 7th Armoured Division.

We moved forward with the corps commander, joining a mass of vehicles miles long and a full mile across which was steaming

ahead like a convoy at sea. It gave one a splendid sensation to feel oneself even a small part of this majestic advance.

By the end of the first day, British tanks in strong force had penetrated forty miles into Libya, meeting with little opposition. The South African Division, on the extreme left and south, made a prodigious swing of ninety miles from dawn until dusk of the first day, and that night were in contact with the enemy at Bir el Gubi, a strong point at an important track junction in central Cyrenaica. Rommel was evidently husbanding his tanks, keeping them out of the difficult Sollum area where they might have been cut off and interposing them between our advance and Tobruk, along the Trigh Capazzo, the main desert track thither from the frontier. The extension of the railway from Mersah up to the frontier, which had been pressed forward at the rate of three miles a day, meant that our tanks were able to go into battle absolutely fresh : from railhead they were carried into battle on transporters and hardly ran on their own treads until within sound of the enemy. The transporters then stood by to carry them out of the battle should they need repairs.

The attack evidently surprised the enemy. He had long expected it, but for weeks before zero hour our Intelligence had filled the Cairo bazaars with possible dates for our offensive and, just as the Nazis bamboozled the Dutch before the invasion of Holland by staging 'mock offensives' beforehand until the defenders began to think that any move so well-advertised could never happen, so this war of nerves seemed to have tired the enemy.

But now the mask was off. Enormous concentrations of lorries, fifty, seventy, one hundred in a group, were dispersed over the desert and convoys chugged to and fro. I should think we must have been using something like 20,000 vehicles.

By the night of November 19th we had caught up with thirty corps who were in laager forty miles inside Libya, about twenty miles south of the Trigh el Abd.

Next day we moved up to Bir el Gubi, where the South Africans were up against a strong position with half the Arriete Division in the box there and the other half sculling around behind it. Brigadier Dan Pienaar, who later was given command

of the South African division and was killed in a plane crash while on his way home to South Africa, was in charge, and we nearly ran into the brigadier as we approached the front. The redoubtable "Dan," than whom no one could swear more picturesquely either in Afrikaans or English, was seated on the lip of a slit trench large enough to hold himself and two of his staff, when one of the latter looked up and saw our little convoy approaching at a brisk pace. He bawled to us to keep our dust down, lest we attract the attention of artillery spotters. When he noticed that we showed no signs of stopping, he jumped out of the trench and held up his hand. The brigadier wanted to know who in thunder we were, driving hard into the enemy's front line, and the staff officer, poking his head into our car, called back, "It's a bunch of crazy war correspondents."

The enemy were in fact only a few hundred yards in front and Dan Pienaar, as was his habit, was nearly in front of his own front-line troops. But as there was nothing whatever to show us which was enemy territory and which ours, we would have gone bowling on into captivity if we had not been pulled up.

Dan Pienaar told us to disperse our vehicles and spend some time with him so we sat down on the edge of his trench and listened for half an hour to a most lucid summary of the proceedings up till then, interspersed with reminiscences of the Abyssinian campaign and horrible imprecations against the obtuseness of most English generals.

"Here I sit," observed Dan in his rolling Dutch accent, "plumb in front of a position full of tanks, and where are my own bleddy tanks, I ask you? Not a bit of bleddy armour have I got, nothing but these little flyweight armoured cars we make down in the Union, and some 25-pounder guns. . . ."

"You know what the plan calls for?" he continued. "It calls for me to roll up this el Gubi position and swing straight up on Tobruk, and how in hell can I do that without any tanks? If I attack this place head on I'll lose half of my brigade."

However, it seemed that in the first three days the enemy had withdrawn his tanks for the most part to form a line in front of Tobruk, towards which our advance units had now advanced half the distance from their starting-points. We had turned the



defences between Sollum and Sidi Omar on which Rommel had been working for months and already our threat to relieve Tobruk was taking shape, but Dan said he was uneasy about what was going on behind el Gubi ; his armoured cars reported considerable numbers of German tanks hanging about there, perhaps with the intention of doing a raid into our rear areas, and that is exactly what ensued.

Here my diary can speak for me :

*November 20th, afternoon.*—This is the battlefield of Bir el Gubi where yesterday our tanks clashed for the first time with Italian tanks, and claim to have knocked out forty-five of them for the loss of twelve of ours. Immediately after, our tanks were ordered north to help the 7th Armoured Division and its support group under Jock Campbell (who won the V.C. at Sidi Rezegh) and Dan Pienaar now complains he will be in the soup if the Italian tanks sally forth from the Gubi position. An Italian tank with six jagged holes in it lies near me and South African soldiers are just burying the dead crews, one of whom had an Edgar Wallace thriller in an Italian translation on the ledge beside him when he was killed. Nearby is a British tank with its officer dead inside it. The enemy are starting to shell us from the Gubi position. Maybe they think our tanks are still here, but alas, it's only us. I've not been under shellfire before. I suppose this stuff might be termed pretty inaccurate, but it's not pleasant, all the same. Every time you hear the whine of one coming, you want to duck. Now our batteries are opening up from behind us and the sun is beginning to go down, so I don't suppose it will last much longer. The South Africans are preparing for a local attack which is due at first light. Each man has dug himself a little hole in the rocky desert in which to curl up during the night : we are doing the same. It's hard work and keeps you warm. You have a feeling that you are all in the same boat here—the brigadier, the tommies and the coal-black Africans who are here, too.

*November 21st.*—We all spent a trying night and are now having an uncomfortable morning. At last light last night eleven Italian fighters swooped down upon us machine-gunning : those

of us without arms, or with only small arms, lay on the ground as best we could, but every man with an automatic weapon stood his ground and peppered our tormentors as they swooped down. The machine-gunning was exceptionally poor for not a single one of our men was hit. In the early hours machine-gun fire was heard over No Man's Land, and about 4 o'clock in the morning the rumble of heavy firing was heard, increasing in intensity. Our brigadier told us it was a tank battle to the north-east. In the absolute still of a desert night, sound travels an enormous distance, so it may have been right away near Tobruk.

Right up till daylight the tremendous din continued with scarcely a break. At dawn heavy shelling began. One dropped 15 feet from the brigadier's trench; he escaped unhurt but covered in rubble. The aim was much better: I dare say Germans as well as Italians are inside el Gubi. Our role for the moment was to lie on the open desert and take it, and for three hours we had to lie there while the enemy guns strafed widely across our position. Unfortunately, we had shifted our position in the early hours, abandoning our trenches, so we had no shelter. Sean Fielding had gone back some way to see if he could get our dispatches off and we could not move, or else he would never find us again on his return. So a very unpleasant morning was had by all. I confess I was thoroughly windy and would have liked to quit. It seemed so silly to lie there, offering yourself as a target, if you did not have to. And an unfinished story lay in my typewriter in the car. Once I went back, sat inside and tried to concentrate on finishing it: but out of the tail of my eye I watched where each shell fell, and as their sequence began to creep closer to my location, I found myself unable to concentrate and presently left the car, and lay down behind a small sage bush. The shelter it offered was purely psychological, yet it seemed preferable to lying in the open.

It is better when our own guns start to reply, each shell roaring like a squadron of fighters as it passes overhead. All the time, lower in the scale of sound than this bombardment, is the continued roaring of tanks in action which lasts on and off all morning. Knowing nothing of what passed elsewhere, we none the less guess that one of the biggest tank encounters of the campaign must be

raging somewhere on our flank. Weary with the incessant bombardment, we look up on hearing the sound of aircraft over us and feel like cheering when we see the British insignia. They dive down on the enemy positions, twenty-five of them, and after this the guns are silent for a while. At last Sean Fielding reappears, having failed to get the despatches away, so we decide to go back in search of 30 Corps, which has an airfield near it and planes going to Cairo. By this time I feel extremely unheroic and am very ready to go. Some Messerschmidts fly over us on the way—so low you can see their Prussian crosses—but leave us alone.

We find Corps and look forward to a quiet night and a hot bully stew and some tea as we were unable to light a fire near the front-line and are pretty worn by the shelling. We meet Randolph Churchill who gives us some news before flying off to Cairo with our 'copy' in his pocket and a rather high proportion of our scarce whisky under his belt.

It seems that a vast and bloody game of chess is being played out all over central Cyrenaica between the Egyptian frontier and Tobruk, with thousands of supply and fighting vehicles being used instead of pawns.

In the centre the situation is confused, with gangs of German tanks at large endeavouring to shoot up our supply columns but, nearer Tobruk, we are doing well. At least 100 Axis tanks have been knocked out so far: our losses are not light, but are believed a good deal less than theirs. Nowhere is there a 'front'; our tanks have cut the Nazi tanks off from their bases and they are between ours and their jumping-off places: the difference is that we are there in greater force. We discovered that at one point our party reached a pinpoint only 36 miles from Tobruk and 65 miles deep inside what had been enemy territory. There had been plenty of enemy tanks in our rear—but fortunately we had not realised it! We did pass one British convoy going like smoke northward, having just eluded some German tanks, who prey on such prizes like corsairs. And what rich pickings! To-day, as far as the eye could reach, the desert was covered with British lorries, thousands upon thousands of them. The scene was like some great trek to the American West envisaged by a film director with delusions of grandeur; the lorries with their canvas tops looked

just like covered wagons. In between were AA gunners seated comfortably on portable chairs with their weapons at the ready. Once we saw drivers whiling away a wait by kicking a football about on the sand.

*November 22nd.*—Colonel Fellers, the American attaché, had the rare fortune to see a tank battle from close to. He told me he saw the contestants rushing headlong together, then they wheeled away and a running fight developed at very slow speed—not more than 5 miles an hour, he thought—while they fired into each other with devastating effect.

*November 23rd.*—We move up to 7th Armoured Division at dawn and find them breakfasting close to the Trigh el Abd. They have had shocking losses in tank battles, but no major, decisive engagement. I think Cunningham expected to fight one big battle with the German tanks that might decide the campaign, but it hasn't worked out that way. Rommel has been 'cagey,' only used his tanks in small running fights. An intensely cold day and at night it's hard to sleep for the wind which howls *under* one's camp bed. During the day Italian tanks came close to us ; these were the Arriete, moving north from el Gubi. We could hear them approaching in the stillness—fifty of them, we were told. Then our guns opened up on them and at various points on the horizon one could see, by standing on the roof of the truck, black columns of smoke arising. These may not be tanks, but the supply trucks they have with them. Brigadier Campbell was wounded to-day whilst fighting his support group out to safety after they had been attacked from east and west simultaneously : at one moment it was touch and go. Campbell stood on the roof of his staff car when only 800 yards away from fifty German tanks and observed them through his binoculars : shells were falling all around. In another running fight, Brigadier Davey, in command of one of our tank brigades, led his own men into battle in a tank, occupying the gunner's seat and firing on the enemy himself. We scored one great success by seizing an enemy aerodrome and taking 700 prisoners on it, more than half of them German. I met them being taken to the rear in trucks. The Germans in their sand-

coloured uniforms looked sullen and would not speak. They had little to eat or drink until rations came up for our own men, who were fighting on iron rations all day. A couple of tough British tank men with rifles guarded each truckload of prisoners and once, when German planes came over machine-gunning, they ordered them to lie down on the desert and find what shelter they could. Obediently, the Germans got out and lay on their faces while their own machines strafed them, then like automata they climbed back into the trucks and sat immobile as before. The Royal Tank Regiment lieutenant in charge of the prisoners said to me :

"When my tank was hit and caught fire, we all managed to get clear and lay down in some bushes, shamming dead. Some Jerries passed us only ten yards off, but for some reason didn't come over to do any looting. If one of them had cut off our buttons or taken our caps, I couldn't have kept a straight face. My crew were marvellous actors. They scarcely breathed. We lay there in the sun for seven hours. When darkness fell the Germans went away and we started off to try to walk in the direction our headquarters had been in. We mooched along for miles until we saw a sentry on a ridge. Our hearts were in our mouths as we cautiously went up to him. Imagine our relief when in the loveliest Cockney imaginable he challenged us, 'Alt, 'Oo goes there?' We more or less fell into his arms, and to-day I've got the delightful job of guarding all these prisoners until I can catch up with my squadron again."

After nearly a week's fighting in deep desert without a well anywhere, with every drop of water having to be hauled from Egypt, we are still wonderfully well supplied. Our small unit is typical : seven men in three cars. We have about 11 gallons of water between us all daily for cooking, drinking and the radiators. We don't wash. If we shave, we put the water in the radiator after. We control our thirst as best we can ; fortunately it's rainy and cold, like an English autumn. It works out at one cup of tea in the morning and another at night, with some additional liquid in the nightly stew. We try to drink nothing in between.

*November 24th.*—I was just changing my shirt this morning in the 7th A.D. laager when the cry went up, "Boche tanks

coming !” Sean bawled out, “ Every one in the cars : let’s get cracking !” We could see tanks approaching. They turned out to be ours, but they said that Jerries were coming after them. The Divisional Headquarters with its cumbersome command vehicles had pulled up stakes and was off in a flash. But I think we beat them to it. We turned east and drove hell for leather. After driving about half an hour we ran into 30th Corps. They had heard that a big German push was on and joined us in the move eastward. “ Where the Germans heading for ? ” we called out and the reply came, “ Egypt.”

This was Rommel’s big counterstroke. The tanks Dan Pienaar had been worrying about, “ skulling around behind el Gubi,” had begun an offensive with a view to cutting our communications, raiding into Egypt, shooting up our “ soft-skinned vehicles ” and destroying dumps. For a couple of days they had great success and seriously damaged our striking power. Many dumps which the enemy did not reach had to be blown up by us lest he seize them, so the total loss was very great. This was the moment when General Cunningham’s plan was knocked awry. It was said at the time that the general’s own decision was to call off the offensive and move back into Egypt to regroup. Be that as it may, this decision was not taken. Auchinleck ruled otherwise. The vulnerable 30 Corps H.Q. was ordered back into Egypt and as much transport as possible also driven back into safety, but the 7th Armoured Division stayed on the job and the Indian Division attacking Sidi Omar and the New Zealanders in the north stayed on theirs, risking the interruption of their lines of communication. Thus was the initiative kept in our hands. When Rommel’s raiders had exhausted themselves, our men inside Libya resumed the attack and, in the end, won through.

But I shall never forget that 24th of November. Our army in the centre appeared to be in full retreat. All those brave fleets of vehicles we had seen forging to the west, were now turned the other way, chased and chivvied by the enemy for twenty-four hours without ceasing. And crowning ignominy !—even the Italian tanks joined in the chase. A great many supply trucks were lost and an incalculable number of dumps went up in smoke.

No wonder the enemy radio began to speak of a decisive crushing of our offensive.

As we retreated the enemy tanks rushed up and down our southern flank devouring the "soft" vehicles as wolves devour sheep. It was a fearsome, a pitiful sight. The German tanks were followed by mobile guns and lorryloads of shock troops. At one moment the situation almost reached that final *reductio ad absurdum* envisaged by strategists when Panzer warfare first burst upon the world—that two opposing armies might change places with each other like two sets of children playing "French and English." Enemy columns rushed into Egypt whilst our advance units were knocking on the gates of Tobruk.

In this strange sort of warfare, however, final victory goes to he who gets into his opponent's backyard first with the most men and succeeds in sticking there: and the task of our men in the north was to hang on grimly regardless of all the irregularities going on in their rear. Therein they succeeded, but when a back tyre burst on my truck and we stopped to change the wheel with the booming of German guns getting unpleasantly close, we were not in possession of this comforting assurance.

Streams of vehicles shot past us in full flight. Shellbursts could be seen clearly to the south of us. Several truckloads of German prisoners went past and we wondered what they were thinking as their own shells were falling, not more than a mile away from us now. But, with expressionless faces, the Germans hung on to the tailboard like tired passengers on a crowded omnibus.

Now we found ourselves left entirely behind. The desert had emptied. As we strained and sweated over the wheel we looked ever and anon over our shoulders and noted the shellbursts creeping up on us. I couldn't help recalling the exaggerated suspense scenes in the early Movies when the Villains giving chase seem to be catching up on the Hero all the time. But I had no confidence that I would continue being cast in the role of hero although the drama in which I was playing seemed unreal enough for anything to happen. Just as I was wondering whether we ought not to leave the conspicuous vehicle and try and make off on foot; just as I was thinking, "Surely we are not going to

stand here impotently and let ourselves be captured," our driver looked up from the wheel and with a loud whoop of triumph called out, "It's on!"

He had jumped to the wheel and let in the clutch almost before we had leapt into our places, and we tore off eastward, but steering a little way to the north as well in order to get a little farther from those unpleasant looking shellbursts. I don't think I felt frightened or distressed during this time. All I recall is a feeling of the most exhilarating excitement as though I were galloping bareback on some wonderful horse (a feat which I should have hated to have been called upon to perform in real life). And I remember shouting into the wind some nonsense about having made our getaway from the Bad Hombres (for the Thrilling Sequel Visit this Theatre Again Next Week).

A mile or so farther we overtook the two best cinematographers in the desert, Ronnie Noble, who had got into the German ambush with me in France, and Freddie Bayliss (both were subsequently lost—Ronnie a prisoner in Tobruk and Freddie killed in an aeroplane). They were in a desperate situation as their car had a serious breakdown, so they just jumped on to our running-board and hung on for dear life, abandoning some of their cinema equipment which was too heavy a load to add to ours. Their faces when they saw us overhauling them were a study in blissful relief.

All day the pursuit went on. Towards evening we fell in again with 30th Corps who were falling right back into Egypt. Darkness came down as we found ourselves still on the wrong side of our own minefields. A huge concentration of vehicles milled about, each trying to find a gap for itself, and organisation was not what it should have been. We could not show a light so finally two officers were sent ahead on foot to find the gap. At last the way was clear and hundreds of vehicles, in single file and nose to tail, began to jolt their way through. We picked up speed when out on the other side and, still without lights, hurtled along with our eyes straining to catch the outline of the car ahead. Crashes were many in the darkness, cars banging into one another as goods wagons do when the locomotive slows down. We nearly knocked our heads off on the windshield when we ran into a Jeep ahead



which was too low down to see, but after four hours of this, we broke away from the main column and joined a smaller one which was turning back to re-enter Libya farther north. Another slow, agonising passage of a minefield had to be gone through, until about 4 o'clock in the morning, we halted on the open sands not far from Sidi Omar and slept where we sat.

At dawn a local sentry woke us up with the warning, "Don't hang about here after dawn ; you're right on the skyline and we don't want to be shelled because of you."

All night long German flares had been shooting up around us, so we had had little sleep and our nerves were jumpy. For this reason, perhaps, Sean Fielding decided, Irish-like, that now was the time to display a little British phlegm. Declaring that the whole retreat had been shameful and quite unnecessary he proclaimed that he did not intend to retreat another yard but stay put just where he was.

"The cars are in an awful state," he added. "This will be a good chance to do some maintenance on them."

"What, right *here*?" I ventured, mindful of the sentry's warning. My whole instinct was against staying in that place. Maybe Sean felt that way, too, but he became very 'regimental' when Sam Brewer, who had been keeping our log and helping to navigate, announced flatly that he had no idea where we were.

"That settles it," said Sean. "We stay here and set our house in order."

So the drivers set to with spanner and grease-gun while we 'brewed up' for all and eat some bully out of the tin. We none of us felt happy. Halton complained that I made a disgusting noise when I sipped my tea. I retorted that I had never seen anything so 'refained' as the way he drank with his little finger in the air.

But as soon as the light came, these waspish pleasantries were extinguished by a brisk salvo of shells which seemed to come right out of the sunrise. The sentry's warning had been well-founded. Someone suggested moving the vehicles, but Sean said they wouldn't waste many shells on us, so we must sit tight. And lie tight we did, for over two hours, while out of a profusion of shells which 'they' seemed only too ready to waste, many fell

amongst us and straddled our position left and right and fore and aft. There was no shelter. My instinct was to get away from the vehicles which were the target so I rolled myself over and over like a skittle until I had put thirty yards between myself and my truck, and caressed the sand, stretched at full-length, feeling more uncomfortable than I had ever felt in my life. I am quite at a loss to explain how it was we were not all killed. We certainly *ought* to have been. Near bursts punctured several of our tyres and sent fragments through the body of the station wagon in several places. Red-hot bits of metal went singing over our heads, cutting into the sage brush around us like swift electrical boomerangs. A spent piece rolled to rest by my hand. I picked it up but dropped it again immediately—it singed me like a cinder.

Bill Downs, our irrepressible driver from Finsbury, lay in the most exposed position at the top of the rise and every now and then he would sing out the same refrain :

"Captain Fielding? . . ." (Wheee—Whoomph !)

"Yes, Downs?"

"When the 'ell do we get out of 'ere, Cap'n Fielding?"

"Driver Downs . . . (Wheee—Whoomph !) . . . Shut up!"

I shouted to Downs to roll over like I had done and get clear of his truck. But dominated by the hateful yet compelling conception of duty with a capital D, Downs replied with careful articulation and great dignity, "I cannot leave my vehicle."

What he wanted to do was to get into his precious vehicle and remove it to a place of safety. Only on that billiard table where each bush looked like a house, safety was not to be found.

When at length the last shell had burst, the last shower of sand and pebbles blown over us, we got to our feet, astonished to find we were all still intact and that the cars, when we had changed the wheels, would still go. Now we wasted no time. In the clear light of noonday we saw before us a great minefield and made for a gap in it. Very soon we found ourselves challenged by an Indian sentry who told us that this was Sidi Omar, lately captured by General Messervy's Indian division. We drove into a great lozenge enclosed by barbed wire, some three miles long by two across.

What the Indians had done was to wedge themselves into the

centre of an even larger German-Italian lozenge, parting the enemy aside as a breast-stroke swimmer parts water. The main defences in the centre were ours but the enemy were still installed in the two extremities of the lozenge and firing from both ends into the Indian positions, while the Indian guns fired back upon them. Rommel's raid into Egypt had cut the Indians' communications and we were now effectively besieged in the midst of the lozenge. Not only were the enemy on both our flanks but German tanks were also moving around the whole Omar position on two sides. The Indians at that moment were completely boxed in and we, entering their box, had put ourselves temporarily 'in the bag' also. We were caught inside the Omars for five days.

Our water and petrol were running low and so were our rations, now that we had the two cameramen as our 'guests' in addition to our normal party of seven.

Like the innocent 'new boys' we were, we parked down in an empty place which, we later found, had been given a wide berth by every one else because it was always being shelled. But by this time we fancied ourselves a little blasé about shelling.

The first person I met was a padre who had just escaped from imprisonment with a most interesting story. The Germans who were now raiding into Egypt, he said, believed that Rommel was following close behind them and that their push was going to be consolidated: this was probably why they were taking such big risks. The padre was with a British field ambulance captured near the frontier by a flying column of four German tanks, two armoured cars and two staff cars. Leaving a few guards in charge, the column went on. During the night some escaped Italian prisoners came in and behaved more pleasantly than the Germans had done. One Alpini officer said to our padre, "Alpini in Libya? what would you—no snow, no skis—besides this hat is ridiculous."

The Alpini officer was told Rommel would be arriving soon and to have everything shipshape. But instead of Rommel there came 58 German tanks which swept through the camp and on into Egypt. They had hardly gone, however, when Hurricanes swooped down on them. The Germans were bombed again and again by the R.A.F., and next morning only about half the tanks came back, bringing with them Lieut.-Colonel Stephan of the

5th German Tank Regiment who was severely wounded in the bombing. The Germans carried their colonel into the British operating theatre but he died under the anæsthetic. One Italian soldier spat on the ground as the German passed and said in English he was glad they had been bombed, but most of the Italians were servile before the Nazis. The Germans were chastened after the bombing and thanked the British doctors for trying to save their colonel's life.

General Messervy summoned us when he heard we had arrived in his 'box' and our maps, which had been recently marked at 30th Corps, were of interest to him. We were his last visitors from the outer world for five days. The last in before us was a New Zealand officer who had been at Sidi Rezegh, where the biggest tank clash so far occurred. When his car was riddled by machine-gun bullets he jumped out to take cover. As he did so, another bullet shot off a strategically-important trouser button, but without harming him a jot.

"To lose a fly is always embarrassing," he said, "but in these circumstances, well *really* !"

While General Messervy was talking to us some of our light tanks came in from patrol with the report that between 30 and 40 German tanks were approaching from the direction of Egypt at full speed. Our midgets had in fact been chased in. We had no large tanks inside the position to meet the Germans.

General Messervy came out of his tent and looked through his glasses to the east.

"Hm," he muttered. "There they are. About two miles off, and coming in fast."

Then, turning to his senior staff officer, he said, "Tell the artillery to smarten them up a bit."

Then the general found time to shake my hand and to indulge in a few moment's of social pleasantry, more as though welcoming a guest to a tennis party than directing a battle through a very trying moment. One wonders how often this sort of attitude is not *assumed* by generals, in order to inspire those around them with confidence. Surely no man of imagination could face such a moment with such apparent indifference . . .

After watching the oncoming tanks a moment, he turned back into his office and rather ostentatiously went on with his work.

Then ensued what was, I believe, the classic Gun v. Tank battle of the whole campaign. The German Mark 3's and 4's had chased our midgets before them and they, with their higher speed, had run behind the shelter of the minefields and hidden gun positions which were waiting to open up on the enemy as soon as they got within good range. We had 25-pounders and 2-pounder anti-tank guns out there. A direct hit from a 25 would certainly destroy a Mark 4—but field-guns were never intended for such by their makers. However, we would soon see now . . .

Men began clambering on to the roofs of trucks and stood there, like spectators at a point-to-point meeting, the better to see the contest. Now the German tanks opened fire. You could hear the singing whine of their solid shot, but the range was extreme. No visible damage anywhere. Very slowly the Germans rumbled down an incline towards us. I counted 25, but was too excited to be certain of more.

Then they turned broadside on into line and passed before us, firing towards our guns. No sooner did they turn, than our guns opened up on them. Now the din was tremendous. Columns of sand and smoke shot up into the air where our shells fell. Smoke billowed out all around the Germans, as though they themselves had laid a screen. Some of our bursts were oily black in colour, indicating a hit. One tank which could not have been more than a thousand yards from where we stood flared up and burst into flames: others slowed down and turned away, evidently damaged. For about a quarter of an hour the fight continued. The Germans passed and repassed before our position and now some of their shells were coming through our gun positions and spending themselves on the sand close to us. But since the tanks weren't firing at *us*, and we were just getting the overs, it did not occur to most of us to worry about them. But an outraged major came out of a tent bawling to the spectators, "Take cover, you bloody fools! This isn't the Aldershot Tattoo!"

Some did, but for most the spectacle was too enthralling to miss. Even the general now popped out of his tent, raised

his glasses for a while and murmured a few more 'Hum-has.'

The Germans had evidently abandoned any intention of breaking into the box. They had no sappers to lift the mines and the only entrances were so covered by guns that it would have been suicide to try. So they concentrated on trying to knock out our guns, but as *we* were to find on many a later bloody occasion, tanks cannot hope to deal with artillery at close range. The Germans were learning this now. A number of black hulks were already burning. I saw no men leap out. They must have been killed. Some of our own guns had ceased firing. "Short of ammunition?" I stupidly inquired of a bystander, who looked at me hard and said, "The poor blighters have been overrun."

And then you could see that in some places the German tanks were closer to our wire than where the flash of our guns had been coming from before. It must be a terrible thing to be in a gun-pit over which a tank is about to pass. . . .

But the Germans were outgunned and they had begun to find this out. Now, with an admirable uniformity, they turned away and began to climb the incline again, pulling away. Some made the error of withdrawing in single file along the ridge where they stood out like toys on the horizon and gave us beautiful targets. Our shells crashed in among them and more of those deadly black bursts were seen. Then in the smoke and clouds of churned-up sand, the Germans disappeared from view.

There was a sudden silence. We all felt like cheering, but nobody lifted his voice. Perhaps we all felt that there was no reason why this should not happen again to-morrow and the next day, and how long would our ammunition last at such pressure unless fresh supplies could get through?

But that evening our sappers went out and found eighteen German tanks knocked out. Noble and Bayliss went out with them, cameras in hand. Four hours after the battle one of the tanks still burned with a warm glow, like a roasted chestnut. In one tank they saw a German officer regarding them steadily out of the trapdoor. They called to him, "Hande Hoch!" in tremulous German, but there was no reply. Looking inside, they saw the man had no stomach.

In another tank they found three Italians hiding. Pitifully the Italians pleaded that they should not be killed, as they all had Bambini at home. One of them, a corporal, said he had found the other two dying of thirst on the desert and they all agreed to surrender as soon as they could.

"I tried to surrender months ago," said the corporal, "but my officer had me handcuffed and I lost a stripe. I never wanted this war . . ."

Later other Italian wanderers were brought in complaining that they had had only a cupful of water in three days. One appeared to be half-crazy with thirst and the other so hungry that he was trying to suck some nourishment out of an old discarded food tin he had picked up. But if their comrades keep on besieging us, they'll not find much food inside the "Box" either . . .

Every night for the next four nights the Punjabis and the Royal Sussex of this division extended our hold on the Omar positions in both directions. It was costly fighting, for the enemy were well dug-in and had plenty of machine-guns. But slowly we ate into their trenches and it became obvious that the whole Omar barrier along the frontier would ultimately be ours.

On the evening of November 27th we heard that Tobruk had been relieved—a tonic much needed at the time, for our infantry had been heavily engaged with the Germans for twenty-four hours and the enemy's shelling had increased, getting upon all our nerves and making the Indian soldiers fighting mad. Some of us spent all the night in a slit trench; it was both warmer and safer than on the desert, except that odd trucks prowling around at night were apt to run over you. So one stuck a tarpaulin on sticks over the hole in the hope that the driver would see it.

Tobruk had really relieved itself, though we did not know this at the time. The garrisons had broken out and made a corridor for the hard pressed 13th Corps H.Q. to get into the fortress. Then counter-attacks closed up the exit again and Tobruk was once more besieged, though never so closely as before, with one of Auchinleck's corps commanders inside it, instead of operating on the open desert. Neither here nor else-

where were things "going according to plan," yet all the time Rommel's tank strength was being worn down, and in the end, this whittling was decisive.

Water was now a serious problem. Throughout the day of November 27th we all felt thirsty. Although we had some chocolate, we did not eat it lest it make the thirst harder to bear. Near us was a water point with two Indian sentries standing guard with fixed bayonets over a pitifully small collection of water-cans. We averted our gaze from this direction as often as possible.

In that part of the Box occupied by the 7th Indian Brigade commanded by Brigadier Briggs, who turned out to be one of the best commanders in the desert, we met Quentin Reynolds the American correspondent who had entered the Box about the same time as we, but from the other side. He was swapping reminiscences with the brigadier who, to his delight, he found to be a native of Minnesota. But the quest of water led us away from this merry circle. One of our drivers reported finding 4 tins containing 8 gallons altogether in a lonely spot; we asked permission to keep our find, and this was granted. So we went off to make a real 'wet' bully stew with it, and half a mug of tea per man, and with the glorious wet taste in our mouths again prepared for an early bed. But there was to be no rest that night.

Under a brilliant moon we saw the shapes of circling aircraft and heard the droning of motors—bombers out on the prowl, looking for something. We assumed they were after the enemy positions at both extremes of the 'lozenge,' as we had seen no enemy planes of late, and we hoped that the bomb aimers would be accurate, since we were sandwiched so closely in between. Presently flares were dropped and in their glare bombs began to come down—not on the enemy positions, but on ours!

With admirable persistence, the planes droned around and around and bombed steadily for three hours. Sam Brewer, who felt it his duty as a *Chicago Tribune* man to make some very neutral remarks from time to time, called out as we lay in our trenches with sleep forgotten, "You must hand it to these Germans—they're doing a beautiful job of bombing." Trucks were hit



around us and caught fire ; one, with ammunition in it popped, and crackled like a firework until dawn.

Casualties were not many because our dispersal was good. But how glad we were to see the first light which drove our persecutors away.

Then came the moment when Sam had to eat his words. The ground was littered with flare-cases labelled "Royal Naval Air Arm." We had been nicely bombed all this time by our own machines ! Such accidents were inevitable, especially in the desert at night, and rancour was soon laid aside. But it *did* tease the Indian Division somewhat when in due course that day's Situation Report reached them, to read in it that " aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm successfully bombed enemy positions at Sidi Omar during the night."

During the 28th we made plans to get out but we were strongly advised not to attempt it, as enemy tanks were still prowling around. We had no means of getting our despatches away unless we took them ourselves. In the afternoon nine enemy tanks on their way back from Egypt approached the Box. They did not seem to know where they were for they came in quite close, then fired a couple of shells inside at random. The response was terrific. All our 25-pounders seemed to open on them at once, and the Germans turned tail and fled in a flurry of smoke and sand, which prevented one from seeing whether any had been directly hit.

Again, a solitary armoured car coasted towards us. You could see the Prussian cross on it. An officer put his head out and waved a Swastika flag from the roof. Our men in the outer defence pits replied with rude gestures and calls for surrender. Whereupon the German complied, together with his crew of three. At the wire he bowed stiffly and said in precise tones, " I am a German Panzer officer."

The reply was a paraphrase of my Lunatic Song—" Come inside, you silly So-and-So, come inside ! "

That evening approaching the Box we saw a line of pennants rippling in the wind and heard the mounting growling and rumbling which heralded the approach of heavy tanks. Were these more Nazi raiders come to try us ? Our guns held their fire.

When the unmistakable contours of Matilda Tanks came into view and a long line of iron monsters came over the rise and made for the gap in the wire. Tommies and Indians ran forward to meet these welcome guests and our joy was intensified when behind the tanks we saw approaching a string of lorries carrying water, food and ammunition—proof at last that the menace of Nazi raiders had declined and that Sidi Omar could be held from now on.

Our relievers told us that most of the German raiders had now withdrawn westward and that Eighth Army H.Q. had moved up close to Fort Maddalena. So next day we left Sidi Omar and set a course for Army, where we could re-victual and get our news away by plane.

Some miles east of Sidi Omar we came upon a British camp that had been shot up by the enemy. Evidence of death and destruction was all too plain in trucks that had burned out, tents that flapped deserted in the wind, and letters and personal things scattered on the face of the desert. We rummaged among the remains for anything useful and found some blankets. But there was blood upon them, and we left them where they lay. Letters told of homes in Surrey and Kent but we could not identify the unit and could only guess what had happened to this little band of men who must have been surprised there at night and cut up.

Back at Army H.Q., I parted with some regret with a week-old beard. I found we had been reported 'missing,' and later I learned that my wife in London had been told—one occasion, at least, when an over-zealous 'efficiency' led to unnecessary suffering.

Two days later we returned to Sidi Omar. It was a day of wild December—torrents of rain from black skies and a wind that cut like a knife. The enemy were still holding out in Libyan Omar. We parked down on our old site near the wire to watch the Punjabis put in an attack designed to clean the place out, once and for all. The attack went in at night. The pale gleam of bayonets in the moonlight was the only evidence of the Indians' silent approach. They found the Italians unwilling to fight when it came to close quarters, but the Germans lying in machine-gun nests put up a desperate resistance. The Indians consolidated and

sat down to await the dawn. At first light the big Matildas which had cheered us so much when they came to our relief a few days before went in to attack. The sight of these monsters looming up over them on the perfectly flat desert was too much for most of the Italians, who came out with their hands up. But the Nazis stuck it out. They were left to stew in their own juice all that day. General Messervy knew they would try to escape, knew there was nowhere for them to escape to, and so decided to waste no more lives on winking them out. During that night they could be heard packing up, getting on the move. Next morning, some hundreds of Germans were found wandering afoot, locked in the desert's merciless embrace and helpless without transport, but trying to get somewhere, anywhere away from the Indians. All were captured and brought into the Omars. So ended enemy resistance throughout this bloody piece of territory.

At once Sidi Omar ceased to be a dangerous bottleneck and became a safe channel through which supplies could flow from over the frontier. All our units in the frontier zone began to move forward. One tiny pocket of Italian resistance remained at Sidi Gherba to the north, but we heard them on their radio say they were down to half a litre of water each per day ; we heard them call for help to the garrison of Bardia, still holding out, but they could do nothing to assist. Fort Capuzzo on the frontier was now firm in our hands : our troops occupied Sollum Barracks and could fire down into the town : Hellfire Pass was contained. The way was now free to attack Tobruk in force.

On December 4th we drove some forty miles to the west and at dusk caught up with the 7th Armoured Division and went into close laager with them for the night. Cars were parked tightly side by side, with the tanks facing outward around the perimeter. You could not light a fire or strike matches after dark. Not far away the enemy were in a similar laager ; you could see their flares going up, guiding latecomers in to safety.

Three days later we returned to 30th Corps to get despatches away and were greeted on arrival by a rubicund Freddie Bayliss who had made a remarkably rapid trip to Cairo to replenish his stock of film. But that was not all that he had replenished. By some extraordinary refinement of 'scrounging' (Bayliss *must*

have been a sergeant in a previous life) he had won for himself a brand-new Ford utility at Abassia and had filled it to the roof with "Christmas goodies," as he called them. There on the desert he opened shop and gave first choice, at what he called "special cut rates," to those who had befriended him when he lost his previous vehicle during the big retreat. It was like meeting Santa Claus in the flesh. We got cigars, tinned ham, plum puddings, tinned fruit and several bottles of whisky (a whisky and rusty water was a great delicacy in the desert), and that night we had a celebration.

In the dawn on December 8th, big forces of re-equipped British tanks passed us on their way to attack Tobruk, which was then defended by the remnants of the Afrika Korps, part of the Trieste Division and Italian corps troops. The crews halted for a 'brew up' near us: some drank tea, others read letters from home and newspapers ten days old, others took a nap. In the preceding hours of darkness we had heard the ominous sound of tanks on the move, the harsh grating and squeaking of their treads introducing a queer note of mechanical horror into the cacophony of war. The noise and the fumes of petrol were such as to remind one of a great block of traffic moving up Regent Street. All this movement was directed towards Tobruk, where a vital blow was to be struck, but before a big battle could be joined, came the glad news, "The Boche is on the run!" The Italians began withdrawing from the Tobruk perimeter while the Germans to the south also pulled out in the direction of Gazala. They had spotted our great tank reserves on the way up and had decided that the danger of being caught between the Tobruk garrison and the relieving force was too great to be faced.

Before they could withdraw from Bir el Gubi, however, a brisk battle was fought and many enemy tanks were destroyed. We drove into the Gubi box and saw the still flaming wrecks there spitting out ammunition and inky smoke. The Box was full of supplies. I won a beautiful little German officer's tent made of green silk, and we filled up our cars with German black bread and Italian dehydrated vegetables. Tommy-guns and Luger pistols were picked up in plenty.

Then we fell in with our old friends the 7th Indian Brigade

who had orders to pursue the enemy west of Tobruk if necessary. They were excited by rumours that the United States had entered the war, but had been moving too fast to listen-in at the prescribed times. When Major Hughes, the adjutant, said that someone had told him the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour and knocked out half the U.S. Pacific Fleet, we laughed it off as an absurd rumour. But that night, the truth came through.

Pitch darkness in the desert—men sleeping by their vehicles ready to advance at a moment's notice—German flares nervously ascending a few miles from us—then on the radio came the chimes of Big Ben and the voice of President Roosevelt informing Congress that a state of war existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire. That was how our frontline troops heard the news that 130 million Americans were at last on their side. Sikhs, Pubjabis and men of the Royal Sussex heard the news quietly : we dared not turn on the radio at full blare for fear of attracting enemy patrols. Two American war correspondents were there. One of them shook my hand and said, "Well, we started out friends : now we are allies."

On December we turned our course towards Tobruk and began rounding up prisoners in numbers too large for comfort. Sean Fielding and Matt Halton were roped in to take some of them off to a cage and I was left in charge of our convoy for the rest of the day. A tremendous air battle developed as we moved north between thirty British and German fighters. They dived whining and screaming over our heads at a great height, then a Tomahawk chased a Messerschmidt down out of the blue and roared over us so low that you could see the faces of the two pilots. Our man was machine-gunning the M.E. : the pilot of which was automatically machine-gunning the empty air before him, so that most of the bullets spattered down among us, the P.B.I., lying by our trucks on the ground.

We made el Adem aerodrome that night and Sean and Matt caught up with us.

Strolling about by myself in the dusk, I came across an Italian M13 tank in a wadi : it was quite unharmed. The hatch stood invitingly open and I squinted inside but feared to open it up lest there be a booby trap within. Probably it had just run

out of fuel and been abandoned. I went to get the engineers to come and destroy it.

On the morning of December 10th the enemy were reported in full retreat. Our friends of the 7th Indian were ordered to Acroma : the 22nd Guards Brigade, they said, had been ordered to make straight for Benghazi across the desert ! Perhaps the Germans will attempt a stand in front of Gazala, we thought ; but meanwhile Tobruk beckoned irresistibly and we drove in.

It was a grand feeling to be back in such happy circumstances, and to play the guide to those who had not seen it before. I guided our column down to the Wadi Auda where after nearly a month without water we went wild with delight at the sight of so much of it and splashed it over ourselves like lunatics—shaving and slopping about in the delicious stuff as though it had been champagne, or asses' milk, or a costly cocktail of both together !

Then to a real English tea with the Australians, with scones, Australian butter and jam and gallons of black tea. After which, the sandy tents seemed to offer all the comfort of a hotel and though Tobruk had its usual raid that night, we were too sated and happy to pay any attention.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### TO BENGHAZI FOR CHRISTMAS

WE LEFT Tobruk along the Derna road which felt like a drawing-room carpet after the hundreds of miles of bumping to and fro across the desert, and turned south along the "Axis Strasse," built by our enemies to by-pass the fortress during the days of its siege, and now rechristened "Democracy Lane."

It was amusing to inspect the monument which the Italians had erected where the road begins in that café concert style affected by dictators, bearing ponderous plaques of Italian and German soldiers around its base intertwined with fasces and swastikas. Perched thirty foot aloft on top of the monument were three grinning tommies from Tobruk, and we stopped to take their photographs. For months they had been dreaming of breaking out from their imprisonment and surging along this road in pursuit of the enemy, and for them this moment must have been one of sheer intoxication.

The fourteen days that elapsed between our entry into Tobruk and the fall of Benghazi were days of pursuit and of mounting triumph ; but this did not become apparent from the start. The enemy had abandoned Tobruk after wasting nearly nine months in its siege and had fallen back upon a line running south into the desert from Gazala, some twenty miles to the west ; these were strong positions, although they could be turned, and at first it did not seem likely that we would be able to bring forward a large enough force to turn them, and strike directly at Benghazi across the desert, before Rommel could recondition his armies from the well-stocked base at Benghazi which had been his for so long. But my diary tells the story :

*December 12th, 1941.*—Up on to the escarpment by Acroma and fall in with Brigadier Willerson and his Army Tank Brigade. The brigadier is a 'character,' red-haired, combative, a profaner

of generals, one whose favourite phrases seem to be, "There was I, with my ropey old tanks . . ." (all he has are Matildas), and "So I said to Auchinleck, I said, 'It's no bloody use using tanks in penny packets.'"

His men think highly of him and say he should be in command of an armoured division.

We spent the whole day around Willerson's concentration : cold and windy, but we picked up quite a lot about tank fighting from these very knowledgeable men and, after dark, had an enormous bully stew, several tots of whisky and a cigar apiece !

It was a 'make and mend' day for men and vehicles, with steaming mugs of tea in the intervals of work and a chance to take a nap when one could get out of the wind. After eighteen days of incessant fighting the tank men enjoyed themselves up here, overlooking the Mediterranean. At last they had a little leisure to stretch their legs and observe the few things of interest this wind-swept desert has to show—some of them rather touching. They saw and heard migratory birds freshly arrived from Europe ; swallows and thrushes newly come perhaps from English gardens ; they had fun with a stray donkey, four camels and three old Bedouin who appeared over the horizon after some Italians had given in nearby, and they looked after a wounded dog which limped in at the end of a long line of Italian prisoners. To-morrow will be another bad day. But to-day they were able to forget for a little that they were men of steel and become for a while just Englishmen abroad—interested in the small change of the daily life around them.

*December 13th.*—Off with Willerson's tanks before the first English sparrow had peeped. See my first really dead Italians lying in the open—one had only his legs left.

For the first time I got authentic information of actual bloodshed between the Axis partners. One Italian officer, ten other ranks and one German soldier were taken prisoner by British gunners. While the prisoners were being rounded up the Italians fired on the German and killed him. A Maori brigade major showed me the official signal reporting this occurrence.

Now I am jotting down notes as we roll along in the midst of the tanks. I will try to do a running log all day. We don't



know how far we are going—perhaps to have a stab at the Gazala line. Stukas have just gone for our foremost tanks. Word comes back—some damage done to vehicles, but only one man killed. Our tanks poured a withering fire upward at the raiders. It was pleasantly reassuring to lie on the ground in the lee of a Matilda and watch the tracer bullets whizzing upward, sending the raiders away with a sting in their tails.

Just heard that an entire Italian anti-tank regiment has surrendered on our flank after the New Zealanders, driving up close to the guns in their vehicles, fixed bayonets and charged the Fascists with cold steel. The Italians yielded up 27 anti-tank guns of French manufacture, obtained possibly under the armistice terms of 1940, and 12 field-guns, all in good condition. The Ities blamed the Germans for retreating and leaving them to hold the position alone, without any trucks to get away in.

*Afternoon.*—Since noon our tanks and lorried infantry have been encircling the enemy's position around Gazala and, on the ridge before me, a battle is going on between our tanks and Axis gunners who are endeavouring to hold them off. It's not a very big battle, as battles go, but it's most spectacular. I doubt whether Hollywood, even to-day with Japanese aircraft in its immediate vicinity, would venture to put into a moving picture so many black and angry shellbursts, so many aeroplanes coming and going, and I am certain they would not venture to depict what is now visible over my shoulder—five fresh batteries of British guns coming up in the middle of it all to help blast the Axis off Gazala ridge. And at the risk of being utterly disbelieved, I must report that a British tank commander bearing a marked resemblance to C. Aubrey Smith, said to me a little while ago, "I am parading my Heavies up and down in front of the Italians, and if I know my Ities, that won't make them too keen to stand and take it when the real thing starts. If they knew that forty fresh Matildas were coming up behind us, I think they'd pack up now. So I think I can promise to take you swimming in the sea at Gazala to-morrow."

The engagement now has a confused aspect. Just in front of me our guns are firing due west upon the enemy positions and I can see our shells bursting on the horizon, while at the same

time the enemy gunners are engaging our tanks sweeping in from the south. Our tanks are now turning and beating off to westward. There is a small force of Axis tanks prowling around our left flank and it's probable our tanks are now just within range of them also, for I can hear a very heavy cannonading. It's not ordinary gunfire but the sharp pinging bark of tanks in action. To add to the imbroglio enemy bombers are hanging about in the clouds and have just dropped several sticks of bombs, in an endeavour to discourage our tanks. Columns of smoke and sand go billowing up on the ridge, looking like fantastic mountains in a fairy tale, but judging by the heavy tank fire that continues, our tanks can't have come to much harm. Now one cruiser tank detaches itself from the rest and darts back towards us. I don't know what this manoeuvre is for, but the enemy artillery are on to it in a flash. A burst goes up just in front of it. The tank swerves, like a rapidly scuttling crab, and another shell goes up close to it. It's most exciting to watch. Will they hit it? I'm sorry to say one loses all thought of the human lives at stake : one forgets there are men inside that steel shell. It seems just like a game. You cheer your own side. But if the enemy gunners should hit that tank, you'd almost cry "Well hit, sir!" before you really understood what you had said. But now the tank is over the nearby ridge, under cover and in safety. The shocking implications of what might have happened and what you *might* have said are swiftly erased from the mind. You catch yourself thinking dreadful thoughts at a moment like this : fortunately, on a field of battle, events fall thick as autumn leaves one upon the other, obliterating that which has only just ceased to be. Otherwise, I suppose, people could not stand war at all.

Now we are moving up a little. The tanks crunch forward like a battle fleet ; our 'soft' vehicles in the middle of the phalanx, with the armoured cars of the Dragoon Guards moving on both flanks. The sea is again in sight, cold and grey.

The enemy line must be crumbling. We begin to come upon signs of hasty retreat—rifles cast aside, some stuck into the sand by the point of the bayonet, grenades and ammunition thrown away and, everywhere, letters and photos blown about by the wind. These Italians seem to have been copious correspondents.

Many snapshots of wives and children and, for some reason, quantities of discarded boots. If I were about to put up my hands, I should hang on to my boots. But it seems the Ities throw theirs away and put on sand shoes. Sensible, if you are running for it ; but what good, if you are just being rounded up ? Motor-cycles lie topsy-turvy on the sand, with Bersaglieri bonnets nearby to tell us who had ridden them ; the cocks' feathers tattered and fly-blown. Now an Italian ambulance, with bloodstained stretchers and surgical dressings littered about . . . its doors swinging and creaking eerily in the wind. Near it are Italian dead—one man piously laid out with hands joined, another unfortunate made unrecognisable by a British shell. A man's leg encased in a top-boot lies by its self.

Jumping out of the car and going over to where a dozen ownerless camels are browsing on the desert, I find them rooting among recent copies of the *Corriere della Sera*, whose New York correspondent predicated with ponderous assurance that Lindbergh, Vandenberg and Nye would see to it that the United States never entered the war against the Axis. Evidence of German withdrawal, too . . . plenty of German cars now in our use. The "People's Car" for which the Little Man in Germany had been paying in advance for years out of small earnings, is now carrying despatches for Democracy.

*December 14th.*—Up with the tanks to the Indian Division and find them having just fought off a heavy tank attack. We are here to see that this doesn't happen again. Thence back to 13th Corps, now up at Acroma, and meet Freddie Salusbury who has brought up the mail. I get five letters, four from Iris, and one with photos in it. No shyness here about handing these around.

In one she is seated at breakfast on a terrace in an English August, wearing a housecoat : in another, holding her white kitten Skindle up to the camera. On this the comment is : "Pity the cat got in front of her face." Odd to think that she is just where I left her, leading very much the same life as before, although so much has happened to me, so many experiences in which, for the first time, she has not shared. However great their imagination (and she happens to be an imaginative novelist) it is really impossible for the people at home to guess how we live. Perhaps

they imagine us in much worse situations than we actually go through . . . In the London blitz, all experience was shared. But now, alas, they *cannot* know how the other half lives . . .

To-night we complete one month in the field. Each night, except that one in Tobruk, spent in the open. To-night is very windy but we face it fortified with Vat 69.

*December 15th.*—We meet Alexander Clifford and Alan Moorehead, the inseparable correspondents of *Mail* and *Express* coming away from 30 Corps. Then on to the New Zealanders near Gazala where we run into Freddie Bayliss again, he with a leg of 'wild' pork which he shot and dressed himself. Must have been a tame porker from a German officers' mess. He offers us a cut and is a little hurt when we decline. That loin is giving off an odour that makes it indistinguishable from any other cadaver.

*December 16th.*—Combined operations last night by the New Zealanders and the Polish Brigade from Tobruk led to the capture of well-defended positions west and south of Gazala, the taking of 600 prisoners and some dozen guns. At first light we saw lines of prisoners hobbling in to the New Zealand positions. The Italian officer leading one party came up to me and said he had four wounded men, one of them with a bad wound in the neck, and could they not get medical attention?

I went to a New Zealand dressing-station where Maori casualties were being treated. Although it seemed to me that the doctors had plenty to do looking after our own wounded, their response was immediate. Within two minutes an ambulance was sent to pick up the wounded Italians, although they were still on their feet. I wonder whether our prisoners get such prompt treatment when they fall into Axis hands?

It can't have been easy for Poles and Maoris to plan an attack together. Later, as I waited for news in the Polish area, a New Zealand brigadier arrived to co-ordinate the next move, and it was fine to see how these allies, geographically and linguistically poles apart, managed to work together.

As the brigadier stepped out of his car the enemy artillery, managing to get our range, started to drop shells into the immediate area. The whine and crump of projectiles and showers

of sand and rock going up somewhat too close for comfort made some of us duck for shelter. But the brigadier, after hesitating for the fraction of a second to judge where the shells were falling, never even looked over his shoulder but walked unconcernedly to where his Polish colleague awaited him.

Bearing in mind how long these Poles helped to hold the fort in Tobruk, they have done a splendid job in transforming themselves from fortress troops into motorised infantry—and first-rate assault troops at that. Most of their transport bears the honourable scars of long Tobruk service, which is journalese for saying that it is falling to pieces, but the wheels still go round and the battered bodies will still carry them, no doubt, to Benghazi or beyond.

As night fell with a heavy dew and piercing cold came bad news—as so often—just when one's resistance stands lowest against it. A whole battalion of the Buffs and the 31st Field Regiment, Royal Artillery have been cut up and twelve of our tanks destroyed in front of Gazala. It's all the more depressing because an armoured division of ours is working well round to the west of Gazala, and it seems likely that the whole line will soon have to be evacuated. Another few hours, perhaps, and all these men would not have had to lose their lives? But the enemy counter-attacked strongly after our men had wedged themselves into their positions and the pressure to the west did not come soon enough to restrain the enemy's hand.

*December 17th.*—This morning the Boche is reported in full retreat on Derna! We fall in with our old friends the 7th Indian Brigade, who have orders to make a forced march through the desert to Derna, whilst our main force comes up the road from Gazala.

Our route takes us slap through the enemy positions which have just been overrun and there is sad evidence of how the Buffs and the 31st R.A. fought to the last. They were attacked from three sides. The grim spoor of their last fight is seen in an abandoned British 25-pounder, its muzzle thrust down into the ground, the earth around it covered with empty shell cases—but not a live round left. Nearby was a German Mark 4 tank, so battered by our gunners that its turret was entirely separated

from its top and its 75-millimetre gun pointing like an ack-ack weapon straight up into the air. Broken Italian field-pieces with their trailers burned out were strewn not far away, and an abandoned German ammunition truck was being set on fire by our men as we passed. Sheets of flame topped by clouds of pitch smoke welled out of it and every few moments shells exploded out of it and hurtled through the air in wide arcs so that it was advisable to give this inanimate belligerent a wide berth. A little further on a German tank was furnishing a similar pyrotechnic display. An American Honey tank was standing by to see the work of destruction completed.

This campaign has inculcated in our troops a determination never to let the enemy recover anything that we can first destroy ; when, later on, I came upon an Italian truck full of petrol cans and filled up my car from it, an officer drove up and suggested I set the truck on fire forthwith lest at any time in the battle's ebb and flow it might subsequently be of use to the enemy. But our advance rolled on so fast, that truck was soon far in our rear.

The whole brigade presses onward with a screen of armoured cars and Bren carriers in front of it and light tanks on the flanks. Brigadier Briggs is in constant touch with his wireless van which travels alongside his station-wagon ; the brigade major, Peter Hughes, and the G2 Intelligence, Tom Roe, travel alongside him while other officers in midget cars carry messages across the line of advance and co-ordinate its general movement. They're very strict on 'keeping line,' just like vessels at sea. I was bawled out just now for getting too close to the car on my right, thus causing the scores of vehicles strung out on my tail to deviate from the straight and narrow.

A noon we halt : our advance guard has just engaged two enemy tanks and thirteen vehicles, putting them to flight.

The first firm contact with the enemy was not made until two hours later when a party of Italians were met with and forty prisoners taken.

The officer in charge of them drove them up to the brigadier, but the latter refused to halt the advance and interrogated them briefly while leaning out of his car, while the whole motorcade continued to sweep forward. Then he waved them away. The

officer then tried to pack some of the prisoners into our baggage truck, but finding it already overloaded, drove them away towards the rear. The last we saw was the disconsolate group still being carried forward in our onrush, which was an act of mercy, for they would certainly have died of thirst had we left them on the desert.

It's a glorious sight to see a whole brigade moving up with all speed in pursuit of the enemy—enough to gladden the heart of any one who has ever suffered under the Nazis. Our vehicles are numbered in hundreds—staff cars, lorries full of infantry and machine-gunners, guns and supply trucks throwing up hundreds of separate clouds of dust until it seems that an army of locusts is sweeping over the plain before us, devouring all before it.

Twenty-five miles from our starting point we come upon a small stone fort with a white flag of surrender flying on it, and nearby, the first real tree we had seen in all the hundreds of miles since we left the Nile Valley. The next thrill is the sight of the escarpment near Derna which, after so long on the flat desert, appears to loom over us as impressively as the South Downs seen from Pevensy Marshes.

*December 18th.*—We laagered close together on top of the escarpment last night after covering 70 miles in some 12 hours—an extremely rapid advance in any form of warfare, anywhere. At dawn we pushed on through villainous wadies whose rocks threatened at any moment to break our axles, and came upon a Bedouin encampment with many camels tethered and women looking impassively up from their cooking pots as we rattled by. A few patches of grass and shrub told us we were nearing Derna. Not far out of the town we were machine-gunned by Italian fighters, but very half-heartedly, and I don't think a single man was hit. Probably their last offensive action before withdrawing from aerodromes now no longer tenable. Then a flock of Stukas flew slowly past us westward without attacking. British beaters scouring the ground too near their nests had put these birds of prey to flight. Kip down for the night in a cave, after firing a tommy-gun into the mouth of it first to make sure no enemy stragglers lurked inside.

*December 19th.*—Halton and Fielding having gone back to

Army to get despatches off, Salusbury and I enter Derna alone, at 11.15 a.m., just after the first Indian troops. Sikhs and Punjabis were searching the houses as we drove down the steep cliff road into the white-washed town, its walls overgrown with flowering shrubs in bright scarlet and purple. Salusbury has felt the lack of water badly, so before we drive in we halt at the roadside and have a tremendous "brew-up," consuming about a quart of scalding tea apiece. Our triumphal entry then goes off in a delicious tannine glow. Finding no one in the governor's villa, a large building in a sober modern style near the sea, with courtyards, fountains and gardens, Salusbury and I take it over and instal our sandy campbeds in his excellency's bedroom which has a marble bath and balcony. Some Italian has been thoughtful enough to leave a bathful of clean water behind, so I am able to wash off most of the dirt I've picked up since Tobruk. After the howling wind atop the cliff, the town is tranquil and warm beside the blue sea. Part of the villa had been occupied by the officer commanding the Luftwaffe in Africa, and a photograph of Goering still decorated one wall. A marble statue of Mussolini had been toppled from its base, presumably by Libyan Arabs after their overlords had departed, and the Duce's head was lying on the ground with its nose broken. We return the head to a place of honour in the dining-room with a German tin hat surmounting it. During the first hour sporadic shooting is heard in the streets where the Indians are rounding up stragglers. Hundreds of feet higher, you can see strings of donkeys being driven out of the town by Arabs, who are looting whatever remains. A camel has actually a stuffed sofa strapped to its back: someone has taken two volumes of the governor's encyclopædia and thrown all the other copies on the floor. It was a beautiful set, worth about £40 in Cairo, I should think. But the illiterate looter had taken only the index volumes.

*December 21st.*—Yesterday we spent repairing the trucks and taking potshots at German planes which came over very low in tip-and-run raids from the sea. One raider, erroneously supposing that so grandiose a building must house someone really important, made our villa his objective, but all the bombs went into the water. The natives of Derna, unconsciously adopting Broadway's



traditional method, welcomed us by strewing the streets with masses of ticker tape removed from the post office. Soon they got busy bartering their eggs and chickens for our sugar and tea.

To-day we drove to Giovanni Berta, which the 1st Punjabis had just taken, and had a meal in their mess. The colonel, a Macdonald, is a mild, patient man. His regiment has had an awful time—hardly any water and haven't had their clothes off for five weeks. The officers are bearded, and two asked us for some underclothes as theirs were "lousy—literally." Unfortunately, we had none clean to give.

At nightfall Fielding and Halton returned from Army, bringing Sam Brewer with them.

*December 22nd.*—In driving rain which lasts all day, we rush on towards Cirene. The water seeps into the cars and we all get wet, but how lovely it is to see the green hillsides and to feel such plenteous dampness about one! The colonist's houses all have sheets, or white flags, hung on the doors, but the inhabitants, of whom some 50,000 are reckoned to be still in Cyrenaica, are more frightened of the Arabs than of us. Mussolini's attempt to settle 'poor whites' in an Arab land has led to much bitterness.

The white farmsteads and red-brown earth, newly ploughed, glow with a brightness dazzling to desert-worn eyes! Men who for five weeks haven't had enough water to drink, are now almost washed away in pouring storms which are turning the Wuthering Heights above Cirene into a semblance of the Yorkshire Moors in January. Women hanging up their washing despite the rain wave to us from their cottage gates: children salute us, goatherds and drovers driving their beasts to pasture raise their hands politely. The whole atmosphere is of a rural community desperately anxious to go on simulating the life of the Roman Campagna in Africa, no matter whether Fascists or Democrats rule.

We found no British troops in Cirene at all but a gang of little Arab boys offer to put us up at the Albergo Cirene, which once was a fine tourist hotel with a magnificent panorama over the hills towards Appolonia and the Mediterranean. The hotel has been most efficiently looted; scarcely a pane of glass or piece of furniture remains unbroken. It has the air of a Ruritanian

royal palace after a revolutionary outbreak—even bath tubs have been wrenched away and removed. Empty bottles of wine are scattered everywhere, and I found a wild dog trotting through the bedrooms. The place has recently been occupied by Sir Aldo Castellani, chief of the Italian Army's medical service, and once a name in Harley Street. His correspondence is scattered all over the place. I wonder if I ought to pick it up and forward it to his son-in-law who, by one of the ironies of war, happens to be Sir Miles Lampson, British Ambassador in Egypt?

The Roman ruins here, associated with the Emperor Hadrian, are superb. A whole township, with baths, Forum, houses and theatre lies in a fold of the hills. It was once a great holiday resort for wealthy Romans. The baths, with their marble pillars and mosaics washed by the rain into pristine brightness and elegance, are the best I ever saw. And the memorial plaque commemorating Hadrian's opening of the place is just the sort of thing Mussolini would put up to-day . . .

Another night under cover strikes one as being almost *too* luxurious. The native mayor came to beg that British troops be quartered here, but we said they were too busy chasing the Italians to halt here. The houses are smeared with extremely bellicose Nazi and Fascist slogans, but I dare say the good people of Cirene were not responsible. They *seem* friendly. If they are not, it would be easy for them to attack us here to-night. If I am able to continue this diary to-morrow, the Cirenians will have justified our faith in their amiability. Now we are going to sleep, let the night bring what it will. Suddenly the electric lights go on all over the hotel. We go around switching them off. Dazzling candelabra look ill over a scene of filth and wreckage.

*December 23rd.*—On to Luigi Razza where we find the road badly blown: no further progress possible for the moment. Terrified Italian colonists ask our protection against the Arabs. A blubbing peasant throws his arms around the neck of a Tommy, and declares that his presence will save his life. The peasant's children, not comprehending their father's emotion, mingle their giggles with his sobs. The Tommy looks acutely embarrassed. These farms have been attacked during the night by Arabs carrying Italian grenades. The peasant then comes up

to me exclaiming, "What a calamity for Italy! We are disgraced, and the Arabs know it!" At Luigi Razza the mayor and old men with shotguns and armlets signifying that they have banded themselves into a militia, halt us and ask for protection against the Arabs. We tell them to defend themselves, and push on. A few miles from there we see a band of about 200 armed Arabs loping along towards the town—with what intentions no one can guess. When we pass the home of the blubbering peasant again, another attack has been made on a neighbouring farm, so Sean Fielding and a couple of our drivers go off with tommy-guns and join a stalking party initiated by some Italian farmers. A few shots are exchanged but no one is hit. Sean is nearly winged, though, by one of our own party! The Arabs disappear into the brushland.

A little farther along, I stop the truck at sight of some very suspicious-looking characters—a knot of Arabs surrounding three men who are in tattered uniforms. Luftwaffe pilots, perhaps? The party look at me suspiciously and then smiles break out. These are three R.A.F. boys who baled out near Benghazi a few days ago and who have been conducted through the enemy retreat by these Arabs, who have passed them off as Germans to Italians, and vice versa. They were afraid to hail me at first, they say, because the Germans have a lot of our vehicles, and as I was driving east, they thought the Germans might be staging a counter-attack. So I take the R.A.F. boys along to the nearest control point: the Arabs all want to come too, but there are seven of them, and our truck is too small. We give them small presents and thank them volubly, without either party comprehending a word.

It strikes one as odd that we should be patting these friendly chaps on the back when Sean had to fire just now at those other Arabs who had been interpreting our radio directives that every Italian is an enemy too literally. How can you blame these simple people for attacking *all* Italians? The R.A.F. boys say some Arab chiefs they met had radio-sets, heard the B.B.C. Arabic programmes, and told them what Churchill had said in his latest speech.

They think they aid us by firing on Italians, and cannot

understand it when we round on them in turn as law-breakers. There is no law but the sword in Cyrenaica as yet.

Back to Cirene at night and find a Frenchwoman married to an Italian who offers to cook for us. She was a Mademoiselle Ferry, born in Algiers. She makes our eggs into an omelette and gives us chianti, coffee and brandy in her little shop. We give her a big hand, a testimonial designed to protect her against Arab depredations, and one Egyptian pound with flour, tea and sugar. We talk of spending Christmas Day here. But this is not to be.

*December 24th.*—On the morning of Christmas Eve we hear Benghazi is about to fall from a battery of artillery who arrive in Cirene. So to horse! Dash on to Barce by the southern road, which is clear of obstructions, and at dusk camp in the hotel there, which has absolutely no food or amenity except two barrels of chianti. Freddie Bayliss swears he heard a turkey gobbling somewhere. We don't believe a word of this and are amazed when he returns presently with two still-warm turkeys in his hands. Simultaneously, Christmas parcels come up in a Public Relations truck. So we are going to have Christmas in Benghazi after all, and well prepared to face it.

And so, on Christmas Day, 1941, several hundreds of men of the Desert Army swept into Benghazi and in the bomb-ruined town, which looks worse than any blitzed English town I had seen, attempted to celebrate the feast as best they might. We wrote hard all forenoon and then set to to prepare the dinner in the kitchen of an apartment which gaped open to the sky. My friends in Reuters in Cairo had sent me a grand parcel and when the party pooled everything, the menu read as follows:

Hors d'œuvres

Ham and Onions, Baked Potatoes and Cabbage

Christmas Pudding

Whisky, Brandy, Kummel, Coffee and Cigars.

We sat down at 4.30 in the afternoon and were half-way through when Bayliss came up with half a turkey which he said his party "couldn't manage." Without believing this, we

greedily and appreciatively took him at his word, and had a really sumptuous meal, officers and correspondents waiting on the enlisted men and 'washing-up' afterwards.

Then visitors dropped in, songs were sung, toasts drunk at the tables in the Russian style and a Song Fest developed and went roaring along until midnight. A tank rumbled down the street with men sitting on it intoning "No-el, No-el" and pulling crackers which, by some extraordinary legerdemain must have been wedged into some corner of the iron beast throughout all those weeks of fighting in the desert.

A couple of German planes came over to drop mines in the harbour, but nobody paid any attention except a couple of Italian priests who had wandered into our room and were very amiably making themselves tipsy at our charge. Their tipling ought to have aroused our suspicions on the spot, but did not in fact awake them until the sad morrow, when a few inquiries led to the police coming in, unfrocking the bogus 'Fathers' and leading them away as fifth columnists. Doubtless they had counted on the sentimental English spilling military secrets into their Christmas cups.

I shall not forget the woebegone face of the older 'Father' as he was taken away. He was a bit elderly for espionage. And, worse still, he was suffering from a most unecclesiastical hangover.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### BENGHAZI TO TEHERAN

PATRICK CROSSE, a young Reuter correspondent who had done very well in the East African campaign, was to come up to replace me with the Desert Army for a while, so after two days in Benghazi, I set off by road for Cairo. Poor Patrick had the ill-luck to be taken prisoner only two days after he took over : he was sent off on a bearing which should have taken him straight to a British position on the desert before Agedabya, but unfortunately the Germans moved forward during the few hours in which he was travelling, with the result that he drove right into the enemy. I did not learn this until I reached Cairo. The enemy still held Bardia and Hellfire Pass on the Egyptian frontier, with the result that our communications were much hampered, and it took one some five days to reach Cairo by road. This was undoubtedly a contributory cause of our subsequent failure to hold our positions at Agedabya.

The Barce-Benghazi road was badly blown at Tobra, entailing another tedious diversion of traffic. We had to do some forty miles along the sea coast over a wretched sandy track, then turn back again to reach Barce : the rain poured down, turning the sand into a quagmire. The car in which I was travelling broke a half-shaft and we had to stand on the road for several hours until a little motorcade containing Major Geoffrey Keating (a skilful and daring photographer who later was taken on General Montgomery's staff) and Alan Moorehead and Alexander Clifford came to our rescue. With them we ploughed on towards Bardia, where we had reason to believe the South Africans were about to stage an attack.

The first night out we were lucky enough to find an empty Italian farmhouse and made ourselves snug within, with a roaring fire which pickled us all in its smoke. But next day the dashing Keating became unstuck from the rest of the party and dashed

on ahead in his peculiar truck which had a hospital cot fitted inside it and was known as "the Passion wagon." We did not see him again until Cairo, and as he had all my kit in his wagon, I was obliged to spend the next five nights sleeping sitting up in a Utility, without blankets, toothbrush or razor. Those were the worst nights I ever spent in the desert. And I had the consolation of knowing that it was entirely my own fault. To become separated from one's kit in the desert was always the act of a greenhorn or a lunatic.

On December 29th we reached the South African positions before Bardia. It was the eve of their attack. General de Villiers received us in his tent and showed us the relief model his engineers had made showing every detail of the Bardia defences. It was a beautiful piece of work. The attack on Bardia had been planned down to the minutest detail.

The ill-fated General Klopper, who was in command at Tobruk when the fortress fell to Rommel in June, 1942, was then right-hand man to de Villiers, and he had much to do with the good staff work which marked this attack on Bardia. Perhaps the South Africans were better in attack than in defence: their performance in East Africa under such leaders as Dan Picnaar was certainly first-rate. A South African division is a swollen affair, with many camp followers, due to the policy of not arming the black man but of using him for semi-military duties. A South African division has many bottle-washers and cleaner-uppers in its train and, seen on the move, is a Great Trek indeed. This contributes to the well-being of the white fighting-man and ensures that he goes into battle at the top of his form. Here at Bardia we noticed that South African rations were excellent, such items as brandy (large surpluses of which were held by the Union Govt.) being issued in ordinary rations. The physique and equipment of the men was splendid, and they were cared for like athletes. But one could not help wondering whether this policy, while efficacious in attack, would not prove costly in a siege. As I write, the full story of Tobruk has not yet been told. But I wonder how many unarmed South African negroes there were swelling the Tobruk garrison when the German tanks broke in?

One day an official inquiry will reveal the whole circumstances.

However, we may be sure that whatever led to the sad collapse of Tobruk after only thirty-six hours, no lack of composure on the part of its commander can have contributed to it. General Kloppe impressed me as a shrewd, slow-moving man of truly Dutch phlegm—a soldier of the old Boer type, who would never get rattled.

At 4.30 a.m. on December 31st, the attack on Bardia began. The assault was made by South African infantry assisted by some British tanks. A big barrage was put up for about an hour. Sappers went in first to clear a way for the tanks which, once inside the first defence line, were to fan out and attack the enemy trenches from the rear. Hundreds of miles of telephone wire had been strung out so that each move might be co-ordinated and, wherever the plan called for a lane being made for the tanks, the telephone wires were 'bridged' so that the tank treads would not tear them up.

The result of so much scrupulous planning was early success. We stood above Bardia watching the attack go in, and by 10 o'clock in the morning, the first phase was completely successful. Free French bombers co-operated with the artillery in strafing the defenders: for once the enemy had no air support and the bombers swooped down so low you could see the Cross of Lorraine lit up by the pale wintry sun.

There was no direct communication between Bardia and Cairo at that moment, and so we decided to get away at the first possible moment and carry our despatches of the initial attack back ourselves. Clifford stayed behind to see the final surrender while Moorehead and I, carrying his despatch and our own, drove away across the desert in a long sweep around Hellfire, which was still in enemy hands. We drove as fast as we dared through a sandstorm by way of Sidi Omar, Sheferzen and Conference Cairn, and then down on to the coast road at Buq-Buq, which we did not reach until late afternoon.

A bright moon helped us to push on through Sidi Barrani to Mersah Matruh, where we stopped the night in a transit camp which was a model of its kind. Run by a Major Weller, whose ability to make the best of short commons certainly entitled him to be known as "Sam," it provided a three-course dinner and a



breakfast of eggs and bacon, toast and marmalade and coffee for precisely  $4\frac{1}{2}$  piastres—say tenpence !

This campaign was rounding itself off in unanticipated symmetry. My Christmas Day in Benghazi had been certainly one of the most convivial I ever spent, and never had I laid out tenpence to such advantage as for this overnight stay in Mersah.

And so the next afternoon, to Cairo in time to cable the Bardia story for next morning's papers in England and to sit in my first hot bath for four months whilst a grinning Sudanese servant, knowing by experience what most delighted the returned Desert Rat, brought me, without being asked, a large whisky and soda.

But these joys were transitory. Rommel was preparing his counter-attack. Our strength in western Cyrenaica was inferior to his, for his supplies were getting up faster than ours. On January 26th we were forced to abandon Benghazi. Sir Walter Monckton, newly arrived in the Middle East as civilian chief of propaganda (*at last* this most important function was taken out of the hands of soldiers, who usually failed to understand its uses), held the conference at which the bad news was 'broken,' and made a good impression by refraining from offering any excuses. He explained the supply difficulty, regretted our resultant weakness, said we would fall back on the Gazala-Bir Hacheim line, which we were confident of holding, and left it at that.

He was right. The Gazala line did hold. We had managed to move our supply network up that far, but no farther. Our old friends of the Indian division executed a masterly retreat from Benghazi : cut off inside the town by the Ariete Division, they drove right through them one night and created such confusion among them by a judicious mixture of shots and inflammatory cries in four languages—English, German, Italian and Urdu, that the enemy suffered them to escape. The Indians fought their way right through to Gazala by a wide movement through the desert, avoiding the roads, as they knew so well how to do.

The Gazala Line was consolidated and the desert war entered a period of lull.

At this time I was leaving Reuters, with whom I had served for 12½ years, to join the *Daily Express* and, as it was not worth while going up to Gazala until my 'release' came through, I spent several weeks in Cairo doing what their detractors affirm all war correspondents like to do (but which is in fact so dull that no man of imagination could possibly stomach it for long), and that is, covering the war from the base.

During this time I sampled some of the splendours of being one of "Groppi's Horse": I shared a flat with a colleague in which we were served by Ahmed, the Suffragi: Mahmoud, the houseboy; Hussein, the chauffeur; and a whole Bench of Boabs at the front door. (The Cairene Boab is a species of concierge which hunts in a pack, two or three being mandatory in the performance of any simple task such as opening a door or buying a newspaper.) I found the life at first relaxing, then quite demoralising, and I looked forward to the day when I would be free to get moving again on behalf of the *Express*, who wanted me to visit the 9th and 10th Armies in Syria and Iraq and, if possible, the Red Army in the Caucasus.

The Egyptian political crisis of February 3rd and 4th shook us all up for the time being. I shall not attempt to describe it here for it is one of several stories which censorship will not permit to be told until after the war. But it is enough to say that King Farouk at first would not hear of Nahas Pasha, leader of the Wafd and the only Egyptian politician with any claim to being a popular leader, as prime minister. The electorate wanted Nahas, of that there was no doubt. And for once the British Government got itself behind the people's choice in an Oriental country and went all out in his support.

On the night of February 4th the square in front of the Abdine Palace was filled with British armoured cars: the British Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson, the commander of the British troops in Egypt and the American minister, Alexander Kirk, went into the palace to see the king. Sir Walter Monckton was with them. A very categorical document was laid before the king. A British destroyer lay at Suez, with steam up. The Allied representatives protested not only over the denial of the democratic process in Egypt but over the sufferance by royal circles of certain notorious

pro-Axis elements. (Nahas Pasha, on gaining office, promptly locked some of these up.)

I went into the Abdine Square while the conference was on. Despite Cairo's 'Blue-out' there was a blaze of light coming out of the palace. Men in gallabiehs, some with bare feet, called out, "We want Nahas!" and the police looked on smiling. British troops, as a precaution, entered the barracks of the royal guard, but no resistance was offered. Probably most of the guardsmen wanted Nahas too. There was no disorder. The scene was topsy-turvy. British troops were out in support of a Nationalist politician.

Next morning Nahas was premier. Demonstrators walked about the centre of the city in mobs clapping and laughing. Outside the Mahomed Ali Club, headquarters of the wealthy pashas, I saw a British Tommy standing on a truck waving joined hands like a boxer and bawling "Good old Nahas!" The crowd of Egyptian students, traditionally allergic to British Tommies, was delighted.

On March 4th, 1942, I set out on a journey which I hoped would take me into Russia. The Germans were advancing and the situation in the Caucasus was becoming grim. The Red Army in Persia might have a vital part to play, and I felt that in Azerbaijan or perhaps around the Caspian, one might hope to see more of the Russian soldier than the correspondents in the U.S.S.R. had been permitted to see.

I travelled by train to Haifa. The crossing of the Suez Canal was a slow and ill-managed process. Since then, a bridge has been built and it would be possible to travel from Istanbul through to Cairo without changing carriages. But at that time one crossed by ferry, in a complete black-out, and waited an hour for the train on the farther side.

Ancient brown 'wagon lit' carriages carried one north in a pretty cheerless atmosphere. But the sight of Palestine the next morning revived the spirits—a countryside as fresh and green as England, or so it seems to those whose eyes are used to Egyptian sands. Mile upon mile of orange and lemon groves, cypresses and Australian gum-trees, the van Gogh greens of the olives and the

rich brown of the soil freshened by rain—a rolling country of small hills, like the Kentish Weald, it must still appear a Promised Land to those who enter into it from Africa, seeing it as Moses first saw it.

At Lydda, where most of the passengers changed for Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, the train pulled up a bit to wait for another coming on the single track, and driver and fireman got out and sat on the line to drink a cup of coffee—very much at their ease, à l'Irlandaise !

It does not seem at all surprising that Jews and Arabs should fight over the possession of a land at once so small and so beautiful. As the train wound along the coast approaching Haifa, one caught a glimpse of Crusaders' castles and then the olive-crowned summit of Mount Carmel came into sight, with villas and hotels set upon it with such montecarlean profusion that one might have thought oneself at the other end of the Mediterranean. South African Army engineers were working on the extension of the railway to Beirut, but at this time it had not been finished, so one completed the journey by car. The road out of Haifa is strung along with modern concrete factories, just like the Great West road out of London, except that instead of a "ribbon development" of villas, the factory workers are housed in neat, white concrete settlements, off the main road, with schools and shops close to hand. These evidences of, mainly, German-Jewish enterprise, help to explain why the Arab, although he will fight to the end against a Jewish political state, does not really want to eject the Jews from Palestine. Refugee Jewish talent and capital have brought too much into the country for that. And the trickle of Jewish wealth keeps flowing in, more slowly now, yet unceasingly. Every year Palestine is being improved—not merely for the benefit of the Jewish co-operative colonies and the Jewish townsmen, but for the inhabitants of the country as a whole.

One gets the impression that if some of those vociferous Jewish Nationalists in New York and London would talk less and permit the economy of Palestine to develop according to its own laws, on its present lines, they would stand a better chance of approximating their political aims. The Arab is allergic to the Jewish politician, but he can feel the benefit which the

Jewish business man brings by the added weight in his own pocket.

I could very readily write a whole book on this one journey through Syria, Iraq and Persia : but the design of this particular one calls for much compression in some parts in order to permit expansion of others. When you are journeying to the wars, you experience a feeling of guilt if you dally long over recollections of pure travel ; the war looms constantly up ahead of you, pulling you on, and although you are bound to play the tourist along that way, you feel obliged to hasten over it. Much of this is doubtless pure hypocrisy. Men are being killed behind you, and before ; you find yourself momentarily in a no-man's-land between, where no firing interrupts the inspection of famous places, the sitting on hotel terraces, the wandering in bazaars. Why not then take Thomas Cook to your bosom while you can ? All I know is that I lack the earthy good sense to do so.

This was not the case with the French soldiers in the Levant, however. They had had their little war, and won it. In Beirut they had settled down to enjoy as many as possible of the joys that could no longer be theirs in Metropolitan France—good food, a good climate and the society of pretty women.

At the French Officers' Club you got an excellent meal for half a crown and a bottle of wine for a shilling. And in the mountains that towered, snowcapped, behind the town, were little hotels and wayside winehouses that might have been in the Pyrenees.

I went up to visit the British Ninth Army headquarters, which was then at Broumana. It did not look to me like a suitable location for an important military establishment, for only a mountain road led up to it and, were this cut, the staff and brain of an army might have been isolated there, 3000 feet up in the clouds above the city. But it was a beautiful little place, with its olives and vines and cedars and mulberry trees for silkworms growing in terraced profusion and although this was a March day of spring, the air was tingling cold.

I pushed on through the Lebanon to Baalbek, where the New Zealand division was in training. At the Palmyra Hotel I ran

into Geoffrey Cox, a correspondent of first-rate ability in France and in the Finnish War, who had gone through Crete in the New Zealand Army and was shortly to be taken out by his government to receive a diplomatic post in Washington. Geoffrey said he had never been quartered in such a glorious place, and I could well believe it. The ruins of the great Roman Temple which was, I believe, the largest ever built in any part of the Empire, tower above the plain and seem to soar to the same heights as the Lebanese mountains which lie in a horseshoe of golden brown and dazzling white around it. The wintered trees are a dull silver, both root and branch, and the towering Corinthian pillars seem to be made sympathetically of pewter as they stand forth against a greyer sky. All is grey and silver. The heavens look as though they are scenically prepared for a flock of wild geese to fly across them at any moment.

The ruins have not been spoiled by over-scrupulous restorers, and a good-sized model under glass enables one to picture what the great temple of Jupiter looked like when its marble was white and new. But it cannot then have seemed a part of the landscape as it does now.

I drove back to Beirut over the same mountain road. At the top of the pass, at 6000 feet, the snow still lay thickly, and more threatened to fall, yet for 50 or 60 miles ahead one could see the Mediterranean stretching out towards Cyprus in a great curve of blue warmth, with clouds riding over it and tiny warships patrolling the waters up towards Turkey.

Early next morning I returned over the same glorious mountains, down into the valley of Baalbek and up into the anti-Lebanon on the road to Damascus, from where one takes the Nairn bus over the Syrian Desert to Baghdad.

Damascus, they say, should always be approached from the desert, not from the hills, if you want to understand why the old Semitic peoples regarded it as the most beautiful city of their world. To the desert-dweller, or to the traveller from the Jebel Druse in the South, the sight of the city walls arising from the plain with the clusters of tender green trees and the sound of running water which is clearly heard whenever the cries of the pedlars in the city's streets are quietened, seems almost miracu-

lous. Damascus appears to arise out of the desert like the vision of a Muslim paradise, like an oasis where Nature seems all the more luscious in contrast with the dead land which surrounds it.

No wonder that the Arab and Jewish prophets tuned their hymns of felicity to the tinkling of the thousand streams and the rustling of the fruit trees of Damascus. No cold Christian heaven here, with white-beards twanging harps above the clouds : but a warm, sunny, verdant setting for an Oriental *fête champêtre*—carpets spread on the greensward, sherbet and hookahs in the shade, Damascene silk for raiment and an infinity of pleasure infinitely prolonged by damsels more knowledgeable than any others in Arabia.

For the Australian troops who were in Damascus at the time the main attraction seemed to be the window in the city walls whence St. Paul is reputed to have been let down in a basket. I was fascinated myself by the scene of this celebrated defenestration for the town has not been allowed to grow up around it and, if this was indeed the window, it gives on to orchards and meadows through which a fugitive might just as easily make his escape to-day.

The Australians made life difficult so far as the bazaar was concerned, for their high spending put up prices everywhere and, when I went into a shop in the Street Called Straight, I found that all the most exquisite brocades (and they were of an order which might make a coronation robe for a queen) were being taken away by Australian sergeants at some £5 a yard. I had to be satisfied with a lesser brocade at half the price.

The bazaar in Damascus is the finest I ever saw—a covered way spotlessly clean, with arcades each of which is devoted exclusively to one type of goods. One lane, for instance, had nothing but red leather slippers in it : another nothing but shops selling Damascene furniture ornate with much inlaid work. Towering over the bazaar is the mosque of the Omayyeds, which at one time was used as a Christian church. The carpets inside are superb and the cloisters around it no less so : I admired particularly a pulpit in green and gold from which the Friday sermon is delivered. As I walked about in my stockinged feet, an Imam was holding a class which appeared to consist of middle-aged merchants : the

Imam was reading from the Koran to an audience sitting cross-legged on the carpet around him. His listeners were telling amber beads and rocking to and fro in rhythm to his reading. For a religious exercise I thought this seemed rather a soothing way of spending an odd half-hour.

The Tomb of Saladin, in the precincts of the mosque, is a touching spot. It is a simple white catafalque in a small garden close. A bomb had been dropped by unknown planes during the short Syrian campaign and had destroyed the adjacent house. But the tomb had escaped. So flagrant a gesture can only have been made by one of the few German airmen who were then in Syria. I don't think any Syrian was misled into supposing that the bomb had been British.

My guide assured me that "your King, Cœur de Lion," visited the spot to see the tomb of his great rival; but this of course must have been moonshine, as Richard predeceased him on returning from the Crusade.

Gladly would I have spent a week in Damascus: the bright, cleanly Arabian town bowered in its great gardens of almond and apricot trees, then in full bloom, presented a glorious picture, whether you looked at it from the encircling mountains or from the desert which crept up to its door. But the Nairn bus left for Baghdad the following night, and I had but 36 hours to spend.

About an hour before darkness fell I got into the air-conditioned desert train, with its enormous wheels and its comfortable seats and bar, and we ran rapidly out on to the desert. The gardens and sweet watercourses of Damascus fell behind, giving place to a line of telegraph posts and an occasional mud fort on the vast, barren plain which stretched 500 miles ahead of us without interruption to Baghdad.

The bus roared along at 40 miles an hour even after night fell. Its huge headlights lit up the desert for hundreds of yards ahead, yet it was amazing to see the way in which the driver held his course, when there appeared to be no definite track. Occasionally, visible miles in the distance, the lights of another trans-desert car convoy appeared and we dazzled one another for a long while before we drew level. Only the big bus travelled alone, I noticed:



private cars and vans travelled in convoys, for safety. These convoys were mostly arranged by the Nairn company also, and the Nairn company in turn is merely two brothers of the New Zealand Army who stayed behind in the Middle East after the last war, got bitten with the desert bug, and started the first regular service between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad. In those days the danger of banditry and even murder was very real ; even now, it is not supposed to be safe to cross alone.

As the evening wore on we had a meal of sandwiches and hot coffee served from a kitchen at the back of the bus and a whisky and soda as a nightcap. Then the lights were turned down, we pressed our reclining chairs back as one does in an aeroplane and slept pretty well until the rising sun awakened us at Ramadi, the start of a paved road which leads to Baghdad via Habbaniyah, the great R.A.F. base in Iraq. In the middle of the night I had a faint recollection of jolting awake as the vehicle halted and of seeing a Beau Geste sort of fort with sentries on guard. This must have been Rutbah Wells, midway across the desert. But its aspect was so unreal that, on waking, I could not make up my mind whether I had really *seen* the fortress in the early hours or not.

We got to Baghdad about 10 o'clock. I made some good friends there, most of whom were enthusiasts for the place, so it is difficult to speak my mind about Baghdad without, in a sense, disparaging the locale in which they truly have their whole being. But candour (and the circumstance that in Cairo I had seen the very glorious coloured film called "A Thief of Baghdad") compel me to report that never in my life have I struck a more repulsive city.

It is almost impossible to believe that this hideous evil-smelling collection of narrow mud-brick streets and utterly featureless architecture can ever have been the Heidelberg of Arab art and culture which it was under Haroun el Rashid. Rashid Street is the only *memento* of this great ruler. And what is Rashid Street ? It is the Mile End Road in mud, thick in grey dust, often blacked-out by sand storms from the desert and defaced by mile upon mile of cheap shops and booths, lit by yellow flares at night, and selling all the junk of Birmingham and Pittsburg. It is almost as hard

to believe that this hideous place was the source of the great Sassoon family and of various other families of Baghdad Jews who have contributed to commerce and even to culture in a dozen countries of the West.

Only at night, when the lights come on along the swift tawny Tigris and the infinite squalor is largely hidden, does the place become bearable. I stayed in a small hotel overcrowded with British officers called (after the legendary sailor of our nursery rhymes) the Sinbad. It had a balcony overhanging the river and at night you could eat your dinner out there. There seemed to be few mosquitoes and it was pleasant to watch the bumboat men paddling clients across the great stream in barques shaped like gondolas, with a yellow lanthorn hanging at the prow.

At the time (March, 1942) Baghdad was the epicentre of the Oil Front towards which Hitler then seemed to be stretching out grasping divisions. He had not yet made his descent on the Caucasus, and we wondered whether that inevitable move might not be timed to coincide with an attack on Turkey and a grab at the fields of Mosul and Kirkuk. It was against this contingency that General Quinan had drawn up his Tenth Army—largely Indian—to cover the fields in Northern Iraq. And Baghdad, supplied through Basra and the Persian Gulf, was his base.

Quinan I found to be a small fatherly general, rather reminiscent of Edmund Gwenn, but there was nothing Twee about his operational plan. He was building defences along the 250 miles covering the northern frontier, and his right flank extended into the Persian mountains and linked up with the Red Army in Teheran. He had an enormous area to cover and, as usual, far too few men to do the job. I thanked Heaven to find, however, that there was no "Quinan Line" and that there would be nothing static about any operations we might conduct in the north. The Turks knew we would only cross the frontier in response to a call from them; but we were not going to sit down behind it in event of an attack and suffer ourselves to be pinned down there. We possessed good roads and airfields and our air dispositions were as good as one could expect seeing that the R.A.F. had been in the country for twenty years.

There were a number of Russians and Americans in the town,

co-ordinating a supply network that ran both north and eastward. In the hotel the best-selling cocktail was a "Timoshenko," a ripsnorting affair with a vodka base.

I was fortunate in making the acquaintance early on of Stewart Perowne, the able director of British propaganda in Iraq, and of Freya Stark, the traveller, who very ably assisted him. I also got to know our ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, who had worked with my father years before in various parts of Arabia.

It was a tremendous pleasure to see unmistakable evidence that, even at a time when Russia's and our own military fortunes were at a low ebb, Goebbels was slipping in the Arab world. Baghdad was a centre of our propaganda for all Arab countries, and the experts I met there told me that it was the same story in Saudi Arabia, Transjordan and, to a lesser extent, in Syria as well.

Our propaganda which had failed so dismally in other parts of the world was here highly efficient : the Germans could not compete with the British Orientalists who, in this war as in the last, were serving us well from Cairo to Aden and from Beirut to Teheran. The enemy had got off to a flying start. The very intelligent German Legation staff in Baghdad before the war had fomented Rashid Ali's revolt. At first the Axis radio far surpassed our own. Its Arabic crooners and raconteurs of smutty stories had a *succès de scandale* against which the staid, homely programmes of the B.B.C. battled in vain. But the Axis over-reached itself.

Listeners began to tire of meretricious entertainment always on the same note and of news programmes overboastful, often offensively threatening, with predictions repeatedly disproved by events.

If it be true that Eastern people respect only the strong, then despite the loss of Singapore and Rangoon, Britain was respected in Arabia precisely because any nation which could absorb such punishment as Axis propagandists alleged, and still fight gamely, must be mighty indeed. For two years the Arabs had been told that Britain was tottering and about to receive the knockout blow : repeatedly the date for the 'liberation' of Arabia had come and gone. With our might in men and planes and tanks visible daily,

such propaganda eventually was bound to assume a fairy tale quality.

In outlying regions where Perowne could not often show the flag, he sent cinema vans. From Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk, the vans went on tour preceded by posters announcing "The People's Cinema is Coming To-morrow." At dusk the silver screen was unfurled in the market place and news pictures with an Arabic commentator shown to audiences of five or eight thousand at a time.

In the early days the villagers were often mystified to view some obscure member of our Royal Family declaring this or that open, or well and truly laid, but the quality of the films improved until, just before I reached Baghdad, one of them enjoyed a quite embarrassing success. When some Nazi prisoners were shown on the screen, a village headman rushed up and stabbed them with his dagger.

It took a little while to repair the screen.

Again, after a film of Whipsnade Zoo, a peasant came up and, patting the cinema van, said to the operator, "If you haven't sufficient food for all the animals in there, I will supply some."

Freya Stark asked me to a party in her house just before she left for Kurdistan to spread some Democratic light up there. A small, very feminine person in very young clothes, she has a tiny voice and a manner which suggests that a sudden loud noise might just shiver her into pieces. Nothing in her to suggest the explorer, the woman given to roughing it. But Freya Stark has done some very remarkable journeys, most of them without male help and some of them entirely alone. Her Arabic is not of the classic variety but it is a fluent instrument. She gets on well with Muslim women and, what is even more important, with politically minded young men. Her house seemed to be full of the latter and the conventional ornaments of the British colony, in their well-pressed clothes, were outnumbered by an assortment of young Kurds and Arabs, some in Oxford clothes, others in native garments.

In her drawing-room notable for some beautiful rugs and one very fine painting of a Persian princess of the Middle Ages, Freya told me about her society called "The Brothers of Freedom,"

which she started in Egypt, where it acquired thousands of members, and which she was then organising in Iraq.

"The three great religions which spread over the world from this little corner of it weren't diffused by official pamphlets," she said, "but by word of mouth. That's my strong suit. The society isn't just pro-British. If it were, it wouldn't attract young people in countries where nationalism is rising. It's pro-democratic. It canalises all the indiscriminate anti-Fascist feeling into action. And I don't neglect the womenfolk. Purdah is strict here, yet the stricter the Purdah, the more influence women have, I find."

I protested against this anti-feminist argument, but Miss Stark said she was referring to Muslim people only. Anti-feminist propaganda put out by the Axis in the East was a blunder, she added. Oriental women had no more desire than Western women to become the mothers of cannon fodder.

Adrian Holman was Counsellor of Embassy at Baghdad. He was counsellor at Berlin at the beginning of the war and had the task of actually handing the declaration of war in to the German officials. He and Robin Hankey, son of the Hankey who for so long was secretary to the British cabinet, were at the party. They were about to leave for Teheran to take up new posts in the Legation there. Both struck me as sensible diplomats of the newer sort, who don't live in an ivory tower apart from the Press, but realise how much the two spheres are but a part of one foreign service of information—one official, one non-official—which must of necessity often work together and which *ought* to fulfil complementary functions.

Both told me how the days of stiff diplomacy have been banished for ever by Kinahan Cornwallis. Apart from the parties which the Ambassador himself gives, Perowne has a film show each week in his own building to which a cross-section of Iraq society flocks one hundred at a time. There is no heavy-handed propagandising but Iraqis, who are highly sociable, love these affairs where they meet friends from all over the country. The tea and the cocktails are good, the film usually worth seeing.

In this war there are fewer journeyings in disguise about Arabia, a good deal less romance and perhaps more sheer hard work. But I could see in Iraq how the tradition of great English-

men in Islam continues. Colonel Lawrence and Gertrude Bell live again : the work of Hogarth and Philby and Jacob goes on.

Our new lords of the desert operate with movie vans rather than on camels, but it will take a far smarter man than Joseph Goebbels to catch up with them.

Perowne took me to an audience with the Prince Regent, the Emir Abdul Illahi, who guards the throne for the boy king. There is rarely much that a ruler can say at such an interview. Abdul Illahi is shy and self-effacing. But what he had to say, he said well.

He received me in what is known as the "Business Palace," a pavilion in a garden to which he drives every morning from his palace across the river. While we waited for him, we were given several cups of coffee in tiny, ceremonial cups. Two old Imams smiled and nodded over *their* cups. They, too, were waiting for an audience.

The prince's room is very small and looks out on to a splendid garden. Two Iraqi cavalymen in uniforms like our own Household Cavalry, with long lances from which the Iraqi colours fluttered in a breeze from the Tigris, stood on guard outside the window. The Iraqi revolt was not long past and the life of the royal family had often been threatened over the enemy radio.

The prince is fair-complexioned and good-looking, with a small moustache and the rather melancholy expression one finds on the faces of so many aristocratic Arabs. He wore English tweeds and suède shoes.

He gave me a message for the British people, in a few words. "Tell them," he said, "that the world knows our position : we have chosen our path and we will stand by you, our Allies, to the end. Iraq's own interests dictate this policy. Our ally has already done much for us and we are confident she will do more whenever conditions permit."

The prince talked about paying a visit to England, which he duly did in the following year. When I told him I was going to see the Prime Minister, he said with a deprecating smile, "I expect he will tell you a little bit more than I did !"

(Here, *thought I*, we have the essence of the relationship

between a constitutional monarch and his prime minister—the P.M. is free to talk more !)

And so it proved. Nuri Said Pasha paraphrased the prince in telling me, "Iraq will defend herself alongside her British ally to the limit if she is attacked," and then he added, pointedly, that Iraq would not be like some other nations and play a passive role if provoked.

I asked him what he thought of the situation in Russia, and he answered by saying that the Axis playing up of the "Red Bogey" in the Muslim world was not getting them anywhere in his country.

"We applaud the victories of the Red Army," he said, pacing up and down the carpet (Axminster, *not* Persian) in his office which resembled that of a county lawyer in Exeter or Salisbury, except that the sun beat down on mud walls outside.

"For us Nazism is the menace, for its theory of the Master Race and slave peoples only a little above the beasts runs counter to the Muslim religion. Bolshevism is for those nations which desire it, but I don't think it is applicable to the Muslim world, because we have no class-struggle and we are without the class-consciousness of the West. A poor boy among us can rise to the highest position in the land."

I could not follow him here, but I give his argument.

"A Soviet victory would not affect the Muslim world adversely. But a Nazi triumph would be fatal to many small Muslim states."

Nuri Said was intensely interested in what was going on in the Western Desert, and he very shrewdly advanced the suggestion that the Americans would soon have to take a bigger hand in Africa. What did I think of an American landing at Dakar or the sending of American troops across Africa from Lagos?

At that time I thought both unlikely, and said so. But I remember Nuri Said putting his head on one side and tugging his ear as does a man who guesses a great deal more than he feels he ought to discuss. Then he said, "I feel the Americans will have to come into Africa at one end, and you at the other. Then you will have Rommel like a nut between you and you will crack him."

And he said this just nine months before the armies of General Eisenhower landed in North Africa. This portly, inconspicuous Iraqi general, who fought with the Turks against us in the last war was, and is, nobody's fool. Unlike some other soldier-politicians one might mention, he was a really competent soldier before he tried to be a politician.

The road from Baghdad to Teheran winds for 660 miles through some of the wildest mountains in the world. At this time of year, the snow still lingered on the passes; there was no regular public transport, though you could hire a Baghdad taxi to do the trip for about £50.

A very small army convoy was going up with some "I" officers I knew but they said they had no room for me. So I offered to drive one of Perowne's cinema vans which had been awaiting a driver to take it into Persia for some while. He let me have the car and so, on March 20th, with an Armenian cinema operator and two British Army vehicles with my "I" friends inside, we set off for the Persian frontier.

Not only did the rear of the cinema van hold all my kit but the "I" officers were glad to put some of their bedding in there as well. Thus did the civil arm come to the rescue of the military.

We drove over the dreary wastes of sand north of Baghdad to Karaghan where a great Indian Army camp stretched for miles across the plain, the macadam road cutting right through the centre of it. Here we fell in with some R.A.S.C. men who warned us to beware of the big Russian convoys we would meet in the mountains ahead. The drivers of these drove at a great pace and the convoys were often several miles long, so that the best thing to do was to lie up in a cranny of the road and wait for the avalanche to roll past.

At Karaghan the foothills of Persia began to build themselves up out of a haze of heat and dust in the far distance. Some miles farther on, at Khanaqin, we began to climb into the foothills. The yellow plain of Iraq stretched out behind us, the road over which we had come pointing straight as an arrow towards Baghdad; a little grass clothed the hills about us and patches of humble wild flowers began to appear. The air became brighter



and somehow cleaner. At Khanaqin we found ourselves on the Persian frontier and saw our first Persians who looked a totally different race from the Arabs of the plains we were leaving behind. And so, of course, they are. Though greatly mixed in the south and especially along the Persian Gulf where Arab strains predominate, the old Persian blood that we know from paintings and from the bas-reliefs in our museums still appears—you could see it even among the first frontier guards—the high cheekbones, the sloe-black eyes, the small nose, and oval features.

Down on the Gulf the poor coastwise inhabitants are said to live three months on grain, three months on the locusts which swarm there from India, three on rice and three on grass and herbs. Mazanderan and Azerbaijan in the north are the only rich provinces, apart from the petrol deposits in the south, and the poverty of the average settled Persian is just as acute as that of the itinerant Arab in Mesopotamia. And yet the Persian, to my mind, has an air of greater distinction and self-containedness than the Arab. It is not just that he is conscious of belonging to a once-Imperial race, a race that even in its degeneracy is capable of producing some of the finest handicrafts in the world; the Persian seems to put himself without diffidence upon a level with the European. The Arab does not, probably does not want to. The dress which the former Shah Riza Pahlevi imposed upon the peasants may foster this impression—European trousers and boots, a European jacket and, nearly always, a blue peaked cap such as a chauffeur might wear. (I was told that there is an enormous trade between New York and Persia in second-hand tweed coats warm enough to withstand the Persian winter).

At the moment there is scarcely any trade of any kind with Southern Persia, except the one-way flow of war material to Russia, and in consequence the Frontier Guards and customs men in their blue and yellow uniforms have precious little to do, save wave an occasional British convoy through the gates of the grandiose customs house, in the style of the Casino at Monte Carlo, which Riza Shah had built at Khanaqin.

The customs house was entirely empty inside: swallows nested in the electric fans in the roof (there was no current, in any case, so the birds could not be disturbed). But the customs

men seized with delight on our cinema van. It was a civilian vehicle and did not yet have Persian diplomatic plates. Here was a job to occupy every man in the place, and they fell to with a will, filling up forms, telephoning to the next town for instructions and holding our convoy up three-quarters of an hour on the strength of this one car, for they could not touch the military vehicles.

I do not hold this against them. Protestations about time-wasting formalities in the East are themselves a waste of time and betray an ignorance of geography and of the effect of climate on the human mechanism. The electrician of New York causes life to move faster there than in London. East of Suez the hands of the clock move more slowly: the measurement of Time is really quite different and should require a different timepiece to register it. It is surely time that the enterprising Swiss produced a new patterned watch for use East of the Canal, allowing, let us say, 48 hours for a day.

So we wandered about Khanaqin without displaying too much spleen while the Persian officials put in what was probably a whole month's work on that one van.

Then we took the road for Kirmanshah. It wound steeply up towards the Paytak Pass. You soon forgot that you were in the East at all. Thoughts of sand and camels quickly became anachronistic in this mountainous land. The altitude-posts along the road read 8000 feet, close on 10,000 feet. The mountains were running with icy streams; in the gardens of the stone-built villages were rose-trees in bloom and, along the water course silver poplars planted in neat rows. Patches of cultivation ran up the hillsides and disappeared above the tree line, which was the domain of the mountain goat and the bear. Snow lay over all the tops of the valleys and the cheeks of the peasants were red with rude health and the cold. Some of the men wore what English preparatory schoolboys are won't to call 'Tout Caps': their women wore trousers. Some were hawk-nosed, some Mongolian (Genghis Khan, perhaps?), the little shepherd-boys wore fur caps as they drove dainty black sheep in search of the scanty pasture—all the Persians we passed looked vigorous despite the poverty of their land. They had the stout look that mountain people have

in any country. What a tonic they were, after the lassitude and *je m'en fichisme* of the hapless inhabitants of the dreary Mesopotamian plain !

We found the Paytak Pass most impressively fortified : anti-tank ditches crossed the road as it wound to the summit and walls, with firing embrasures fitted, had been built right across the valleys so that it would be impossible to by-pass them. It would surely not be possible for any mechanised force to thrust its way up here. And this was the chief gateway from Mesopotamia to the East. Presumably, it would only be of use once the enemy had overrun the Tigris-Euphrates valley and at that moment, the threat appeared much more likely to mature from the Caucasus, into Northern Iran itself ; but none the less one had to be impressed by the careful foresighted planning of this huge defence work—built 2000 miles distant as the crow flies from where the enemy then were.

By dusk we had covered 240 miles of the most twisting mountain roads, of which the base was good but the surface, as yet unmacadamised, nothing but loose stones. No wonder the army consumes such a vast quantity of rubber in this part of the world and that a single tyre now costs £150 (if you can get it) in Teheran.

We were now at Kermanshah, a town of over 100,000 people, which lies in a green valley surrounded by the most massive snow-covered peaks. At one end of the town is the latest oil refinery of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and there is also a huge grain silo built by the old Shah. Otherwise, the town can have altered little in the past 500 years. Two main streets have been cut across its centre but the roadway is unpaved, the houses low and the only attempt at modernisation consists of a round 'Circus' with blue-painted booths lining it, where the main streets debouch. One sees this same circus all over Persia. The Riza Shah seems to have got the idea from the Piccadilly 'roundabout' in London. To-day, a Persian settlement must be insignificant indeed if it escapes having one of these circuses.

"Panem et circenses," in the form of a roundabout and a grain silo in every town were, in fact, Riza Shah's two gestures of appeasement towards his subjects. But alas, the silos were

usually empty and the prices in the circus shops above the means of the people they were intended to serve.

Long before you come to a Persian town the sight of an old droshky lumbering along the road gives warning of its approach. Cars are very few and townsfolk seem to think nothing of driving miles into the country in a one-horsed cab.

Inside the town, the streets were jammed with droshkys. It was the hour of the evening parade and Persian officers in their waisted mustard-coloured uniforms and German-type caps were promenading up and down, taking the air. Negligently they leaned out of the cabs saluting comrades who passed them in the street. I saw a couple of soldiers standing frozen into salutes on the kerb : the object of their attentions was a fat colonel in a gharry, whose head was concealed by the hood, but whose jewelled hand emerged every now and then to wave recognition to the rabble who stood motionless as he drove by. As the parade consisted solely of driving up and down the main street, the motions of respect and of airy acceptance had to be gone through time after time by all parties.

We slept in a little Armenian hotel : it had a rose garden behind it, and every inch of the floorspace was covered in carpets. A great display of rugs is considered to afford a tasteful indication of wealth, especially by Armenians : and the walls as well as the floors were decorated with them. The dining-room walls had British propaganda posters pinned on to the rugs and there were a few Red Flags and photographs of Stalin as well. We dined well off scrambled eggs, local cheese and fruit with some Persian vodka (rather sweet) and some excellent Shirazi wine and, after listening to the smooth accents of the B.B.C. giving us the day's news, retired to small white-washed bedrooms which were like monastic cells. Fortunately, they bred no unpleasant surprises.

The next day was the Persian New Year's Day, and the first day of spring. We were on our way as the sun was rising. It was intensely bracing and cold, like an autumn morn in Scotland. The mountains looked mauve and dangerous : by full day we realised the sense of claustrophobia that must afflict the Kerman-shahi folk, shut in so tightly in their valley, with only one road and an aerodrome, now too small for modern planes, giving access

to the world. The passes are snowed up for weeks in the winter. Then the town just lives on its 'fat.' And it has not the air of sleekness that would be necessary for that.

Mounting still higher to go through the Shah Pass (no defences here) the country becomes wilder and wilder. The mountains stretch before us, range after range, in improbable profusion. It is a sort of Switzerland gone mad. In parts the scene is just like those arid yet somehow classic vistas which appear in the drawings of the *Punch* artist who signs himself "Geo. M."

Hamadan, which is the old Persian Ecbatana, lies on the slopes of an immense peak, the snows of which send down fructifying rivulets through the city all the year round, so that the gardens here are famous and a rare patch of green several miles in length runs from the snow-line deep down into the valley. There are some fine villas belonging to government officials, and formal gardens hidden behind high mud walls, which permit only the tops of the fruit trees and the silver poplars to show. There is the usual 'circus' and one long, wide street which cuts the old town in two. The mosques are undistinguished. Each of the powers maintains a fine consulate here so that Hamadan has a little diplomatic life of its own and in summer the climate remains delightfully cool.

We noticed a short, fussy gentleman dressed in the latest London cut, with tie and shirt straight from the Burlington Arcade, mincing down the main street, swishing a path for himself with a fly-whisk, the crowds giving him a respectfully wide berth. This, we were told, was the governor, a gentleman very smart and very Anglophile. He has a stern way with bandits, however, of whom there are apt to be many in the winter time when snow-blocks the roads and whole regions are cut off. He is apt to cut off an ear or a finger when he catches one, "pour encourager les autres." What would happen to this elegant little man if he himself should fall into the hands of freebooters is best left undescribed. Presumably he travels with a sizeable escort.

It was not difficult to imagine bandits operating in the wilderness we drove through after Hamadan. For miles we did not pass a single house, or even a shepherd. The northern road

to Teheran through Kazvin, which was in the Soviet zone of occupation, was blocked by snow, so we turned sharply south-eastward and drove at a steady forty miles an hour over an endless white ribbon of road in the direction of Sultanabad, where the trans-Iranian railway joins the road to Teheran.

This day we covered almost exactly the same mileage as the day before—241—and in the late afternoon drove into the great valley of Sultanabad, drawing up among a crowd of inquisitive children, who swarmed over the cars and had to be forcibly prevented from picking our buttons off our uniforms as souvenirs, in front of the Mille Hotel, another Armenian hostelry not quite so polished as the one before, but still a good enough place for so primitive a town. The Persian guidebook guilelessly averts criticism by admitting on page one that the country's hotels are not in an advanced stage of development ; so that if one were bitten in bed (I never was in Persia) or upset by a greasy concoction of mutton and rice, one would really feel no call to complain.

The country around Sultanabad is of a solemn, cold grandeur, like some illustration from an old book which portrays the mythical lands wherein Jason sought the Golden Fleece.

But that evening I found, in the *Journal de Teheran*, how warmly eighteenth-century, how rococo and Louis Quinze, this surprising country can be ! Listen to these Persian pomposities in the grand manner :

“ By Imperial Firman, the divisional general Aboul Hassan Pourzand is appointed director of the Administration for the Improvement of the Equine Strain.”

Rather a gracious way of announcing a bowler hat—from G.O.C. to Horse Doctor, by the Shah's command !

And again in the same paper, “ Representatives of the engineers and teachers now on strike were received in audience by his Imperial Majesty the Shah of Shahs. The interview lasted one hour at the end of which the Sovereign gave precise instructions to the Prime Minister, who was also present, that the demands of these representatives of the intellectual classes should be satisfied. It was decided that the engineers and school teachers should return to work forthwith. After having very respectfully

thanked the Sovereign, the engineers and teachers then left the Imperial Palace."

And so presumably, did the prime minister, with his tail between his legs !

Between Sultanabad and Kum the road traversed country more desolate and with less cultivation than before. The peasants in consequence seemed more backward—fewer second-hand American garments here and more of the old Persian skull cap among the men, of long robes and veils among the women. There were more mud-brick mosques along the roadside too, and presumably more Mullahs to keep the peasants in line and persuade them that now that Riza Shah was gone, his sinful unveiling of the womenfolk might go too.

Kum itself approaches one's ideal of Samarkand—a great golden domed mosque in the centre of the city which can be seen glistening against the snowy peaks of the mountains behind Teheran when one is still miles away, a bazaar in a square with striped awnings let down over the booths, which are as neat as bandboxes ; a press of donkeys and camels in the streets, a profusion of cloisters and minarets. This seems to be a city of craftsmen and artists. The merchandise is of good taste and quality : you wonder whence come the buyers of so many good things—surely not out of the Dasht-i-Kavir, the salt desert which stretches for scores of miles away to the east nor from the grey, volcanic-looking uplands to the west.

Outside the town again the road stretches along dusty ribbon mile upon mile into the haze ahead ; to the right is the great salt lake Darya-i-Namak ; along the road one or two caravanserais said to date from the time of Shah Abbas, their inner courts and sleeping chambers broken and desolate now, but the outer terrace still used by modern travellers in buses to sit in the shade and brew their tea. Two of these buses, bulging with passengers and their pots and bedding piled high on the roof, are drawn up outside and little boys with eggs and unleavened bread to sell have materialised out of the surrounding wilderness and are trading briskly.

One last range of bronze hills to go over and we see before us

the final range which separates the plain of Teheran from the Caspian Sea. A whole wall of snow shuts in the city from the north. To the east, the range is overtopped by Demavand, one of the great mountains of the world, a Fujiyama with its pointed cone 18,000 feet high, but looking so close in the bright air that it is difficult to persuade oneself that it is actually sixty miles away. Teheran lies on a series of terraces which sweep down from the mountain range. Like Kum, it is heralded by two golden domes and then, less distinctly, by the rich sapphire minarets of its Blue Mosque.

Suddenly the crackling of our tyres, the creaking of our springs, which has been going on for 600 miles of rough surfaces, gives place to a velvety tarmac. We roll into broad boulevards, into a square with buildings in the French Casino style, where fountains are playing and where an equestrian statue of Riza Shah scowls down upon a rose garden. This is Teheran, a city with nearly a million inhabitants, which the guidebooks used to call "The Paris of the East."

It was early afternoon. Looking up Ferdowsi Avenue you saw the snowy mountain wall at the very end of the street, like a vista in some Swiss village. The air was mountain air, and the jangle of every bell, the clip-clop of each hoof, was sustained and preserved in its clarity. Behind every wall a small forest of fruit trees sprang up; every villa had its fountain and the sound of running water was everywhere.

I fell in love with Teheran at that moment.

Every departure from a place one has loved upon one's travels is a little death. I have loved many places. How often have I noted, "My last night in So-and-So"—and understood, through the finality of meeting friends one may never see again, how it must be to pass one's last night on earth.

Each time I have left Teheran since that moment I have felt that in that curious mountain town, so much of it cheap and mock-European, yet all of it bathed in an atmosphere that produces nostalgia like the November airs of London produce fog, I was leaving too much behind. To leave Teheran was more painful than to leave anywhere else in the East.



Is everything lovely in the Persian garden? Not quite everything. Since the Anglo-Soviet-Iranian treaty of alliance was signed some things have gone well, some not so well. One can readily strike a balance.

Iran is a very large country, as large as all the Balkans put together. Its great mountain ranges are many times as extensive as the European Alps. For the past twenty years it was governed by an autocrat, Riza Shah Pahlevi, who rose from being a humble soldier who once did sentry duty outside the British Legation, to be the self-crowned emperor of a proud nation of 15 million people.

Riza Shah ruled Iran in the same way as Louis the Fourteenth ruled France. "*L'Iran, c'est Moi.*" When he fled, then abdicated, many things were thrown into confusion because he had centralised the administration so completely in his own hands. The army, for example, which he had maintained as a conscript force of between 300,000 and 400,000 men, for whom he had provided the smartest uniforms imaginable but no modern equipment worth mentioning, was in a bad way. Riza had never delegated any authority within the army, and so there was nobody to pull it together after he had gone.

In other departments of the government, in the state monopolies from which Riza derived the large sums he required for his work of modernising the country, and in the big business concerns in which he had been, more or less, the managing director, disorganisation followed his departure.

And the mess he left behind has not been cleared up yet.

If the roads and railways are in good shape to-day, Riza must get the credit, for he built them. Conversely, Riza must bear the blame for the ill-clad, ill-housed, ill-fed condition of the Persian peasantry. By his monstrous exactions he made them what they are to-day.

Most Iranians detested the ex-Shah. Many had good reason to. I met an official of the new government, a Cambridge graduate in his thirties, who was found by us in one of Riza's concentration camps, a physical wreck. He had been incarcerated there six years for his over-democratic opinions. His father had been 'framed' by Riza on a false charge, and executed.

So that in kicking out Riza Shah we earned the gratitude of our new allies. But many of them wonder why we waited twenty years before ridding them of this turbulent monarch. Some think that Riza was really our creature all along. Never having experienced democracy themselves, they could not understand that a democracy might prefer to tolerate a tyrant rather than incur the odium of intervening in the affairs of a smaller state.

And then the same kind of journalist who used to go to Italy and praise Fascism because the trains ran on time came to Iran and boosted Riza as a great enlightened ruler, a second Ataturk. That stuck in the gullets of many Iranians who knew Riza for what he was—just an energetic and very astute old ruffian.

The first thing that Iranians want to be assured about is that the new era of democracy to which the young Shah has pledged himself will not give way, when the war is won, to some variant of the old régime—with the victorious Allies washing their hands of Iran and letting her drop back into the state of corruption and exploitation from which she was rescued merely through the accident of a world war approaching her frontiers.

The second thing they hope for is that if some of the foreign democrats now in the country stay on after the war and help put Iran on its feet, they will play the game according to the rules they profess to observe. The Iranians were looted by the ex-Shah in the name of Progress. They have no desire to be looted by Europeans in the name of Democracy.

I met a Levantine gentleman in Teheran, an amiable man. He told me he came to Iran five years ago with a certain capital and had increased it, on an average, at the rate of 250 per cent per annum. A journalist from Moscow, seated on his other side, observed, "Where I come from, we shoot people for that." The Levantine was bewildered. He could not see where he had erred.

But the Iranians understand—through bitter experience.

Riza Shah did great things. In one decade he transformed Teheran from an oriental town into a city of splendid boulevards and modern European architecture. True, Riza forgot the drainage until it was too late to do anything thorough about it. The water supply gushes down open conduits and is quite unsafe.

The new schools are handsome—but the curriculum within them is narrow—quite inadequate for citizens of a modern state. Hospitals are inferior and few. But without raising a penny in foreign loans—purely by wringing the last Touman in taxes out of his own people, Riza built a fine town. By the same means, he built the trans-Iranian Railway, one of the engineering marvels of the world. It took eleven years to build, cost at least £30 millions and was completed only in 1938.

He constructed thousands of miles of passable roads where twenty years ago only caravan-tracks existed. He abolished the veil and made his countrymen wear European suits and cloth caps until to-day the average Iranian looks very much like a central European.

For all this the Iranian paid a fearful price in human suffering. Every year the Shah built himself a new marble palace somewhere but in some of the rice-growing regions they starved because the Shah forbade them to grow a crop which would compete with his own rice estates elsewhere. In many districts unleavened bread was the only fare—the peasants could not afford to kill one of their own sheep, so heavy were the taxes, so inequitable the distribution of wealth. The Shah himself did not descend to corruption: he merely helped himself to whatever took his fancy. But in the Imperial administration one could not get anything done without greasing half a dozen palms.

Into this imbroglio the wily Boche inserted himself—with his free trips to Germany for students and businessmen and his lavish parties for Teheran society. The Boche was on his best behaviour. At the Nazi Braunhaus (now Victory House, the British Information Centre) Black Guards danced with the beautiful ladies of Teheran and plied their brothers with cocktails. Iranians—*real* Aryans by origin, as opposed to the crossbred strains of modern Germany—had no cause to be flattered by these attentions. But some of them were. When the Nazis said that Riza Shah was a tyrant, supported by British gold and that true democracy was made in Germany, some of their shafts struck home.

Then came the Anglo-Soviet armies, who threw the Axis gang out neck and crop. *That* was a positive move which proved to all Iran that Britain and the U.S.S.R.—not the Axis—were masters

in Mid-Asia. And the boast of the departing Germans that they would be back in three months was falsified.

But what of our policy since then? Have we done all that we could to draw Iran into full partnership with us? Alas—chiefly through lack of men and the means of full publicity—not so.

We are only just beginning to put our case in Iran. Iranians don't want propaganda. But when we have a victory, we need the machinery to tell the glad tidings in every corner of the land. We cannot afford to sit back and say, "Victories speak for themselves." In a vast country, with difficult communications, victories die stillborn like fading echoes unless blazoned forth by puissant transmitters, in powerful films.

The cause of the United Nations is worthy of more vigorous and very much better salesmanship than it has had in Iran hitherto.

Do we make enough of our French allies, when French schools and culture are so much admired in Iran? We bring wheat into the country but allow it to be marketed in the bad old Riza Shah fashion. Why not prevent profiteers or hoarders muscling in by sending it forth in trucks, under the Union Jack, and distributing it to the people who really need it? Iranians love American films and cars: every American uniform seen in Iran pays a dividend in goodwill. Our Indian troops here do us proud: India and Iran must always have much in common.

But as in every war we've fought, our most important ambassador is the British Tommy. And when this cheerful diplomat and the average Iranian really get together, we shall see good things. The Iranian is far removed from the popular conception of an "Oriental." There is nothing servile about him. He is proud and reserved. He is not easy to know, but he is worth knowing. He is in fact much closer to the Englishman than many of our other allies. The Iranian makes beautiful gardens, rides well, plays good polo, loves music and good wine, has produced some of the finest poetry in the world (the poet Ferdaussi, they say, is far superior to Omar Khayyám, who was lucky in his translator, Fitzgerald). He makes the world's most exquisite carpets, does splendid tilework and silverwork and as an architect has built the finest mosques in the East.

His country is the main bridge between the Soviet Union and the other United Nations. The strategic importance of Iran grows ever greater. From Teheran I can be in the Caucasus in two days, on the Indian frontier in three : and where my car goes, mechanised divisions too can find smooth going.

Yes, the Iranian is worth knowing.

In the Arab lands our skilful Orientalists are defeating Goebbels hands down.

It should be within our power to develop a team of equal talent in Iran so that our association with her, which began as a shotgun wedding, may develop into an alliance of solid reciprocal advantage and genuine sympathy.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE RED ARMY IN AZERBAIJAN

I ASKED the Soviet Embassy in Teheran for permission to enter Transcaucasia. Several weeks elapsed and I was just about to give up hope when word came that, although no foreigner could be permitted to go into the Caucasus proper, permission would be given for me to go up to Tabriz and to the Caucasian frontier, there to visit the Red Army divisions which were being trained to withstand the great German offensive which everybody expected to come soon against the Caucasian oilfields.

To arrange transport was not an easy matter. Tabriz lies some 410 miles from Teheran over mountainous country. There is the usual Persian unmetalled road and there will one day be a railway. Consortium Kamsax, the Scandinavian combine which built the Trans-Iranian railroad, had taken the new line up as far as Mianch : English maps which showed a completed line linking Teheran through Tabriz with the Soviet frontier at Julfa were therefore inexact. The only regular transport was furnished by overloaded Persian omnibuses which carried peasants and their belongings from one village to another and took some three days to reach Tabriz. Had I been a thorough Persophile like Miss Lambton, the erudite young Press attaché of the British Legation who lived *à la Persienne* and spent her holidays among the peasantry, this is the route I should have chosen. But time pressed, as it always does upon the journalist, and I was lucky to fall in with the new British Consul-General at Tabriz, Mr. Urquhart, who had motored all the way from Cairo in a new car and was about to drive up to his post. He kindly found a place for me and my small mule-bag and we set off, one rosy afternoon of late April, 1942, making Kazvin the first night. We put up at a curious hotel which had a very noisy cinema attached to it ; it greatly resembled a Dickensian coaching inn, with galleries running round a courtyard. But the Kazvinski wine was

good and we spent a bugless night. Then, at dawn, we set off along an interminable road which ran through mountain torrents by means of deep fords, across sweeping moorlands and through many a gorge and arid pass by way of Zinjan and Mianeh into the city of Tabriz.

This place, up to 100 years ago, ranked with Isfahan and Samarkand, as one of the fabulous cities of Mid-Asia, but an earthquake in early Victorian times reduced it completely and it was rebuilt in ugly mud brick, without benefit of architect or craftsman, and is now one of the plainest towns one could meet with in any continent. It has only one passable street but a welter of tiny narrow lanes, each lined by high walls behind which the villas and gardens of rich carpet merchants and Turkish and Armenian traders lie concealed. Yet the situation of Tabriz is glorious. Red sandstone mountains surround it, and behind these there rises like a great snowy wall the peaks of the Caucasus and the forbidding grey mountains of Kurdistan, over against the frontiers of Turkey. Through Tabriz there once flowed the rich Asiatic caravans which stocked the bazaars of Constantinople with the carpets and silks which our eighteenth century forefathers began to find so attractive.

To-day the Tabriz carpets are coarse—the sort of thing which unhappy Orientals are forced to make for seaside hotels or tasteless club-rooms. When the Red Army entered the town, they found an enormous modern carpet in atrocious taste, said by many experts to be the largest carpet ever loomed, almost completed in one craftsman's shop. It had been ordered by Adolf Hitler to cover the great drawing-room of his new chancellery in Berlin. The Red officers took it off the loom and laid it down in the recreation-room of their Garrison Club, where they sensibly covered it with chairs in the auditorium, so that its ugliness did not obtrude.

From the windows of the British Consulate you could see the glistening spire of Mount Ararat away to the north-west. You had the feeling of being isolated on top of the world. The place was oddly denationalised. The people of Azerbaijan speak no Persian, only Azerbaijani or Russian, and although the thriving Armenian Republic lay just beyond those mountains with its

universities and theatres, here one seemed to be as remote from the world of *actualities* as though one were in Tartary—and the scenery, no doubt, was very much the same.

Only a score of miles out of the town, indeed, one ran into very primitive country indeed—the territory around Lake Urmia which is inhabited by Kurdish tribes who are perpetually in rebellion against the Persians. Mrs. Winston Burdett, the wife of the American broadcaster, had preceded me up this road by a couple of days, travelling alone in a car with Mademoiselle Zena Agayan, the daughter of a wealthy Armenian family of Teheran and a friend of the Empress Fawzia. The two ladies, both smitten with the desire to be journalists, planned a trip through Kurdistan. They had suggested that I join them. But I wanted first to see the Red Army, and later I discovered that it would take some while for me to get a *laissez-passer* to enable me to accompany them to Sauj Bulagh, whither they had gone to stay with a Kurdish chieftain. So we had arranged to meet when they returned to Tabriz. And meanwhile I called on General Melnik, commanding officer of the Red Army in Northern Iran, who later that year distinguished himself in the Caucasus campaign, and on his chief of staff, Colonel Selivanov.

I had with me an interpreter from our consulate who spoke no fewer than seven languages including, I believe, a Russian so fluent that it enabled him to retail the latest naughty stories from Moscow, although he had never been there. The ideal interpreter for a war reporter! Thanks to him I was soon able to get on trustful terms with the Soviet command. But I was not in the least prepared for the honour which followed.

"We will have a parade for the comrade correspondent," said Colonel Selivanov, "and he shall take the salute."

"I am only a reporter!" I protested. "You really must not do all this for me."

At that time my colleagues in Russia were very rarely taken anywhere near the front, and some of them had told me they had never even *seen* a Red Army unit on parade—the only soldiers they saw were rare officers on leave in Kuibyshev. So that my embarrassment at this suggestion was only equalled by my delight.



"Nonsense!" replied Selivanov stoutly, "you are in British uniform so you shall represent our ally for us."

And so it was. With senior officers I was taken out to a barracks some way from the city and together we marched on to the parade ground. Two companies of infantry were drawn up before us.

Slivanov called out, "Greeting to you, comrades!"

To which the parading troops replied with one voice which shook the heavens, "May you live long!"

This ceremonial over, the march past began. There was no band, but the men's voices provided marching music. The leading officer began with a solo, then the whole company burst into a vigorous marching song. They marched with arms swinging wide across the body. They marched and counter-marched, singing as though to burst their lungs, and their artistry was such that their two themes never clashed, but in the clear mountain air blended into a diapason which suggested illimitable confidence and power.

Confidence in their own power. That is the keynote of this Red Army. These men are splendidly equipped. They have tommy-guns and automatic rifles a-plenty, and you can see they are brand-new—their wooden butts aren't even weathered yet. Their transport has seen hard wear but mark this, all the trucks have new tyres.

Hundreds of men not taking part in the march past are standing by. They are reserve troops for the Caucasus campaign—ordinary infantry, tank and cavalry units recruited in all parts of the Union—Georgia, Armenia, Turkestan as well as Russia proper. Yet individually and collectively they make a finer impression than the picked German troops of the Afrika Korps whom I saw in their hundreds just after being captured, with the swank and jauntiness still in them.

I can see that we must throw out of the window the absurd notion that Soviet troops, although efficient, are somehow rougher and readier than Western armies. Far from it. They don't spit and they don't polish but a sturdier, more vital body of men no army can boast. In manner they are affable but dignified; quick to smile; disciplined but without that servility so repulsive among Germans.

Nearly all are clean-shaven, most are more 'Nordic-looking' (for what that is worth) than modern Germany's cross-breeds. The sum of their physical appearance suggests a bunch of young Americans or Australians.

To become one of their officers you've got to be intelligent. Only high school graduates can qualify. However, since a high school education, crowning ten years' tuition, is open to all and entirely free, every one has an equal chance. In peace-time, after being commissioned, you would have to serve five years as a junior lieutenant before rising higher ; but now this probationary period has been shortened.

I see many women in uniform. One watching the parade wears a captain's pips, with a revolver slung on the hip. She's an engineer. Not many Soviet women, they tell me, are actually fighting in the front line, though they are fighting with the guerillas. Most are doctors or medical orderlies, and they do all the work of the R.A.S.C. A very few girls are flying fighter aircraft, but many act as ferry pilots.

After the parade we inspected the barracks. Each dormitory was spotlessly clean and the beds had plenty of blankets and white pillowcases. Each dormitory runs its own wall newspaper. Pictures of national leaders decorated the walls which were also adorned with red-painted slogans such as "Greetings to all peoples fighting with us against Fascism" . . . "Fight to the death for the Soviet Fatherland !" and so on.

When I commented on the profusion of guitars and balalaikas hanging on the walls the colonel, an old soldier with a humorous eye who wore an order of the Red Banner won in the civil war, slapped his thigh and exclaimed, "Right, let's have some music," and ordered an officer to call for volunteers among the men.

Every one wanted to be in on this parade. Moving into the barrack yard, we found the troops already forming a circle in the midst of which two or three were tuning up accordions and guitars. Then, with a complete lack of self-consciousness, one after another, they played and sang Georgian, Ukrainian and Russian dances.

One captain from Leningrad called out, dissatisfied, "Come, boys, we can improve on that !" and he jumped into the ring.

Despite his heavy topboots, he was a marvel. He got up on his points like a ballerina, then down on his haunches doing the famous kickstep.

When the colonel sang out, "Enough of dancing—let's have some song out of you!" an impromptu choir formed and began a song called "Three Tank men went to war, to fight against the Hun," which had a very rousing chorus. Then they went on to older Red Army favourites, concluding with the "Hymn of the Bolsheviks," with its recurring refrain, "Party of Lenin, Party of Stalin!" . . . which was rendered with an almost religious fervour.

I thanked the colonel for the honour done me, said how much I had enjoyed the soldiers' music and that I would have much to tell when I returned to the Western Desert.

The colonel replied, "Give the Red Army's greeting to the allies in the desert and tell them we will beat finer and louder music yet out of Fascist hides!"

With my interpreter I went around talking to the men with a freedom I would not have thought possible. Most of them were Georgians, Azerbaijanis and Armenians, although some of the officers were from Moscow. All the political officers seemed to be from the South.

For five years previously the Russians had been raising and training a special army of Caucasus men for the defence of their native soil for the purpose of fighting an invasion to the end and then, even if the territory were to be overrun, withdrawing into the mountains and carrying on as guerillas—for years, if need be. Some put this Caucasus Army as high as a million men.

Some of the men said they believed that Stalin, as a Georgian himself, took a special interest in them. Their training seems to have been a cross between that of our commandos and our own Home Guard, and their function will certainly be an amalgam of the two.

All along the Soviet high command had to face the prospect that the Nazis might penetrate as far as the Caucasus and even entrench themselves there. What they had been concerned to do is to ensure that the Germans could never settle down there

to draw the wealth of this richest of all mountain territories away. To this end the Army of the Caucasus was made entirely self-contained and capable of fighting on, even if cut off completely from the rest of Russia.

The Caucasus is a Switzerland or Serbia many times magnified; its mountains dwarf the Swiss Alps, its valleys are richer in cattle, vines, cereals and minerals than any that Europe has to show. It supports its civil population in a state to which few if any other peasant populations are accustomed and, thanks to dumps of food, fuel and ammunition salted away there in recent years, it can support a large army as well. In old Russian folklore and in modern Soviet fact, the Caucasus is Russia's garden of Eden. It is at once a garden, a fortress and a treasure-chest. Its natives have every inducement to fight savagely in its defence. If the Yugoslav patriots had for months defied Axis divisions in their mountains what could not a Red guerilla army achieve with better equipment and in a country even wilder and more impenetrable?

Yugoslavia produced its quislings, but it would be vastly surprising if the Germans found any such in prosperous Armenia—save in one of the well-found mental homes which that progressive republic maintains. Armenians, so long the victims of racial thuggery, have no cause to love Fascists or Nazis. In fact, these Armenian troops have a saying, "All Armenians are democrats except one—and the Nazis had to have him to teach them efficiency." They mean Hitler's celebrated Panzer general, Guderian—an Armenian by birth.

These Armenian soldiers are filled with local patriotism. They are proud of their opera and theatre, of their ballets written by Armenian musicians.

They speak Armenian among themselves and in their own units—Russian being the official language of the command—much as English and Urdu are employed in Indian regiments. No doubt Stalin encouraged Armenian and Georgian nationalism not only because, as a Georgian himself, he sympathised with it and because a large degree of autonomy reconciled the Armenians and Georgians to the Soviet regime, but also because he had calculated its military value in case of invasion. Valuable pro-

vinces which might have to be asked to fight on independently, although separated from metropolitan Russia, would be likely to do so more successfully if their hope and pride centred upon Tiflis rather than upon distant Moscow.

Some of the officers I talked with had prepared themselves to face very serious developments in that summer of 1942: they calculated upon the Germans possibly reaching the Caspian and had drawn their plans accordingly. The Germans have taken over a year to reach the foothills of the Caucasus but, although they were so close, these Caucasian soldiers seemed convinced that they would never be able to grab the prize itself.

One colonel gave me this forecast, which events proved remarkably accurate: "The Fascists will put forth an immense effort this summer and will seem to carry all before them. We shall fall back. We are prepared to fall back. But they will not be able to defeat the Red Army. When winter comes we shall still be in the field intact and then our offensive will push them back, as it did last winter. They will realise then that they can never hope to conquer the Soviet Union, and at that moment our tide of victory will begin to roll. I am confident that that moment will come this year."

Standing there in that verdant valley with the icy spire of Mt. Ararat cleaving the air behind me and with the triumphant singing of these men still in my ears, I could not doubt that he was right. And looking back, I find that on May 2nd, 1942—fresh from my talk with this man—I wrote in my diary: "I'll stake my eyesight against the calculations of any 'military expert' (for none of them *know* what's going on across these mountains anyhow) and affirm without hesitation that the Nazis will not be able to overrun and occupy the Caucasus. The Army of the Caucasus will hold."

I spent many bad moments during the Stalingrad battles, I avow: yet these soldiers had given me such an impression of invincibility that I could never doubt that they, and their comrades from across the Volga, would bring it off in the end.

Much of their confidence probably derived from the fact that they were an army of young men. Nowhere did I see a soldier of any rank who looked more than forty-five, and the great

majority seemed under thirty-five. From all my conversations with them a sublime self-assurance shone forth. Not boastful. But born of the knowledge that their army's performance against the Hitlerites had shown it to be the most powerful striking force in the world. The prospect of defeat, or even of standing upon the defensive, did not seem even to enter their calculations. Their whole outlook was offensive. Presupposing the maximum of Anglo-American effort in the west, they had no doubts of victory—and this at a time when the British papers, and still more those in America, were full of deprecatory hints about the future in Russia. I wished a few of these queasy souls who "Tut-tut" over everything Russian and, without being definitely fifth column, are perpetually sniping at Russian shortcomings, could have been with me at that moment. These men weren't worrying as to whether there was complete freedom for Atheists in Britain nor yet whether dog-racing should be permitted two nights a week, or three. Their one idea was to destroy Fascism in Europe.

I felt that if forty million people in Britain could somehow acquire that happy singleness of mind, perhaps we would help them to win quicker.

The next time I saw Colonel Selivanov at the Area H.Q. he surprised me by talking frankly about India which, he said, "represents an awful lot of good fighters." Two British generals in particular were highly regarded by the Red Army, he added. They were Wavell and Auchinleck.

"With Wavell in India," he continued, "I don't feel much can go wrong there."

Then he said that people in Russia admired Malta very much. In that heroic island he thought they must have the finest ack-ack defences in the world; it looked as though the Italian air force had ruined itself in its attempts to reduce Malta.

Then he told me a story about Mussolini which I won't repeat because it was English in origin, and old at that, but it intensely amused the political officers who were sitting poker-faced in the room with us.

"Mussolini!" chortled this commissar . . . "what an insignificance . . . Pouff!"

In the area headquarters I was surprised by the absence of red tape. At a place from where a forty-two-year-old general commanded between five and six divisions one might expect a certain amount of office organisation—typists, telephonists, despatch riders, filing cabinets full of documents and so on. But all one found was a medium-sized house in which the general and his staff worked with a minimum of office routine.

While Selivanov was talking, one or two officers entered the room saying "So and So reporting for such-and-such a purpose" or for instructions, and the chief of staff would give verbal orders. There was no pile of papers on his desk, which didn't even have a telephone. In Western armies an army commander is often so cluttered up with memoranda and documents he might as well be a business executive. Here there seemed to be an effort to simplify the administrative machine up to the point where, like Karl Marx's state, it simply withered away. But for the uniforms, one might almost suppose that this was the headquarters of some guerrillas rather than that of a regular army. The slogan seemed to be, "Don't write a memo to Lieutenant Tomskey: find him and tell him in your own words what he's to do."

In the next few days I had the opportunity to see how all over Northern Iran, from the Turkish border to the frontiers of Afghanistan, the Red Army carried the banner for all of the United Nations. British or American uniforms were hardly ever seen in the north in those days. In Tabriz I was mistaken for a Red Army man by the merchants who, with an odd mixture of Oriental servility and camaraderie copied from the Russians, tried to coax me into their booths by calling out, "Honourable Tovaritsch—please step inside."

The presence of the Red Army actually proved of advantage to the cause of the United Nations throughout the East because the exemplary behaviour of the Soviet troops gave the lie to the 'red bogey' propaganda which the Axis had disseminated thereabouts for years. When the U.S.S.R. joined the allies, this was naturally intensified. In Iran itself twenty years of anti-Soviet propaganda by Riza Shah made the Persians terrified of our allies at first, but now they tell you that there's nothing to be afraid of in a Red Army occupation. On every side, from Kurds,

Armenians and Europeans as well as Persians, one heard good reports of the Russians. Significantly, about two-thirds of the 3000 White Russians who had been in Azerbaijan ever since the Revolution, had now requested permits to go home, but these are not likely to be granted until the war is over.

You never saw a Soviet soldier drunk. There was no interference with women. In Cairo there was a good deal of horseplay by Imperial troops on pleasure bent, but here, the natives said, the Russians kept to themselves. High spirits they evidently worked off among themselves, having libraries, canteens, and entertainments in their own camps and attending public amusements but little. No propaganda, save what was implicit in plays and films, was being carried on in Iran. The troops were out on exercises most of the time and the political commissars didn't seem interested in cultivating the minds of the Persians.

The Red Army fed itself, was sufficient unto itself. I even saw fodder for the cavalry horses being transported from Russia into Iran. Of course, the northern provinces are by far the richest : in effect, we occupied the poorest part of the country so that there was more excuse for seeing bad conditions on our side of the line.

The Red Army seems to be a world of its own whose members are not dependent upon civilians for anything. Save for an occasional shopping trip, there is no reason why the Soviet soldier should bother with the civilian world at all. A life complete with instruction and recreation is provided within his own organism. The equivalents of N.A.A.F.I., E.N.S.A. and the Y.M.C.A. are embodied within the army itself and the political officers are the education and welfare officers. (I met a tea publicity man in Teheran who told me he was inquiring whether the Red Army would like a dozen Y.M.C.A. tea vans : I told him, "Make sure they're fitted with samovars, not those old brown earthenware teapots !" but I hardly think he was successful. It would have to have been "Young Men's Marxist Association," in any case.)

In the Red Army there is of course no dependence on charity of any kind. The troops get the very best in food and entertainment which a nation at war can provide.

In an officers' club I attended a stage-show of extremely high



quality. Half the programme was provided by local troops, the other half by singers, ballerinas and actors from the Moscow theatres who had come fresh from the front-line, where they had been entertaining the troops in sub-zero weather. Men and girls of the garrison provided a choir of 75 voices and a mandoline-balalaika band of 40 instruments, together with dancers and monologuists.

A success was scored by Tank Sergeant Antonov with a song for which he'd composed words and music himself. It was called "Da Da" (Da meaning Yes), but when I asked Antonov for his score after the show and he inquired whether my newspaper in London would print it, we found that the salty lines were quite untranslatable by reason of puns and double-entendres. However, this was a sample verse :

"The hour will soon be here when the bugle sounds 'Advance'  
Choosing partners for the battle with the relish of the Dance ;  
Let the craven bandit Hitler cover up his bestial jowl  
Russia's Fist sure packs a wallop that will make the tyrant howl ;  
And we'll lay the cursed Adolf in his grave (Da-Da)  
We'll *hurl* the wretched Adolf to his grave."

The reprise was given with immense gusto by a chorus of men and girls, all in tank overalls. Other verses told how Alexander Nevski was also a 'man of steel' who broke the German might and of how Napoleon 'took a toss.'

Other numbers, proved, to my surprise, that the "Volga Boatmen" is still a favourite ballad in the U.S.S.R. and jazz nonsense songs too, such as "Goody Goody" and "The Music Goes Round and Around"—though I could barely recognise them with French words.

When one sees a film of the Red Army marching off to battle singing like an operatic chorus, one can be sure that there is nothing stage-managed about it. I even saw a squad marching off on fatigue duty carolling like a Cossack choir. The proportion of musical instruments among these men seems as high as the proportion of tommy-guns, and that is saying plenty.

We have never had allies quite like these before—tough guys

with the souls of artists, who sing as well as they fight. And they all seemed to be confident that before many months had gone, they would be singing their Victory Hymn.

Then came Stalingrad. And very many of these men and girls must have perished there. But of course Russian singing owes its beauty to the massed effect. The individual voice may be stilled—but the choir goes on. Sergeant Antonov did not write that song for his own voice but for seventy-five others. And somewhere, seventy-five others will be singing it now.

One night when I returned to the mud-brick rest-house in which I was staying, I was told that Leah Burdett had been murdered.

Kunniholm, the American Consul-General, was standing by while the Soviet and Persian authorities conducted an inquiry into the affair.

Leah was Italian-born. She had left Italy as an anti-Fascist years before and recently in Iran she had been doing political work on behalf of the Allies among the Central European refugees there, many of whom were technically 'enemy aliens.' She had been permitted by the Russians to come to Tabriz, no doubt because it was felt that if she broadcast or wrote for America an account of the stable conditions she found there, it would do something to offset the enemy radio propaganda which was trying to make out that a state of Red anarchy prevailed in Northern Iran.

When Leah and her companion, Zena Agayan, announced that they were going into Kurdistan, the N.K.V.D. representatives in Tabriz (the Soviet state police, once known as the G.P.U.) tried to dissuade her. They spoke of the dangers involved, but Leah, whose journalistic sense would only be stimulated by such warnings, insisted on going. The two women had spent a day or two down near Sauj Bulagh being lavishly entertained by the tribes, then set out by car to return to Tabriz. In the car with them were a Kurdish chief and his fifteen-year-old son, both armed to the teeth, as *all* Kurds are, wherever they may be. On the road they were halted by Kurdish gendarmes on horseback who asked for their papers. The gendarmes were polite and while looking at their papers, asked who the two ladies were. They

replied that they were foreign journalists, at which one of the gendarmes replied, "Ladies, you are welcome."

A moment or two later, the same man asked, "Which of you is Madame Burdett?"

Leah indicated who she was, whereupon (in the words of Mlle Agayan, from whom I heard the story soon after she got back to town) the man's face seemed to change. He cocked his old-fashioned rifle and poked it through the window of the car. Then, without a word of warning, he pulled the trigger.

The bullet narrowly missed Mlle Agayan's face. Instinct made her recoil, with her arm before her eyes. The bullet struck her arm, wounding her slightly.

Hearing the shot, the chauffeur at once declutched and the car moved off. The gendarme recocked his weapon and fired a second shot at the car which went through the back seat and wounded Mrs. Burdett.

These two shots were the beginning of a pitched battle. The two Kurds in the car leapt out, dragging Zena into a ditch for shelter, and opened fire on the gendarmes. They shouted to the driver to go on and the car got safely away, carrying Leah with it. Her injuries were serious and she died on the way to hospital. The two Kurds, one of them a mere boy, fought so well that the gendarmes soon took horse and bolted. Then they walked into the nearest village with Zena, who was suffering from shock, apart from loss of blood. From there they sent word for a car which carried Zena into hospital.

I was shocked by this apparently inexplicable tragedy, not least because I had intended to go with the two women.

Zena took the thing very well and, as she was not badly hurt, resolved to stay on and give evidence at the inquiry. Meanwhile the police had arrested a man whom they claimed was the murderer. Zena identified him and made a full deposition. But when the news reached Teheran her family were greatly distressed and urged that she return immediately. The Shah telephoned her father and expressed his regrets: the cumbersome Persian judicial process was put to work. It might take weeks to unroll and meanwhile there was a real danger that a blood feud might break out among the neighbouring Kurds, for a dreadful wrong

had been done to two European guests who had been under the protection of the local chief, and such things can only be wiped out in blood in that part of the world.

So I found the chauffeur of the car in which the murder had taken place and suggested that he drive Zena and myself back to Teheran. He was eager to go, fearing that if he remained in the vicinity he too might become involved in those gentlemanly 'reprisals' in which Kurds delight.

Poor Mrs. Burdett was buried in the Christian cemetery at Tabriz and at dawn on the following day, Zena and I got into the ill-fated car and drove away. The back seat had a Persian rug draped over it to hide the evidence of the crime, but the bullet-hole still remained in the window.

Zena took one look at the place where her poor friend had died and I thought she could not bear to get into the car: but she composed herself and we both resolved not to mention the tragedy again.

But we had a fourteen-hour drive before us. And human nature does not work that way. As we hurtled along through the barren mountain passes (the driver exclaiming that he would not feel at ease until he had put 500 kilometres between himself and the scene of the crime) we went over the event dispassionately and at length, and from Zena's full account, only two conclusions could be drawn. Either the murder was the pointless act of a lunatic, or else it was premeditated assassination. And we both of us felt it was the latter.

The Persian authorities seemed very anxious to explain all by shrugging their shoulders and saying, "Blood feud." But Kurds are not only traditionally friendly with the British and Russians but also have a code of chivalry: they do not fire point-blank at women. If and when they do, they are not in the habit of missing. If the murderer had wanted to shoot either of the two Kurds in the car, it was inconceivable that he would have fired so badly as to miss both of them at such close range.

Leah had been an active anti-Fascist political worker. Who stood to gain by the murder of the Italian-born wife of a prominent American in Iran? Who but the Axis? Zena was emphatic that

the murderer first parleyed amiably, only became hostile when he learned who Mrs. Burdett was.

"It was almost," she said, "as though he was looking out for her. And as soon as he established her identity, he fired."

The inquiry had tended to throw cold water on Zena's evidence, although she was an eye-witness. Muslim policemen are apt to discount the evidence of women over violent deaths, supposing them subject to 'hysteria.' Yet it seemed to both of us that the crime smelt of the Axis agent-provocateur. After all, the Kurdish tribes on both sides of the Turkish frontier lived in such wildness and independence that neither Turk nor Persian really had them in hand. Turkey was not innocent of Axis agents who would have found it possible to come up to the Persian frontier; and there one could hire a Kurdish assassin for a few pounds.

The inquiry dragged on inconclusively. Winston Burdett arrived from New Delhi and came to see Zena and myself before going up to Tabriz to investigate things for himself. He felt that the American authorities were not prosecuting the matter diligently enough; Leah was not actually an American citizen because she had not gone back to the U.S.A. to live and 'take out papers.' And so the poor fellow went up into Kurdistan to follow in his dead wife's footsteps and reconstruct for himself her last hours.

I spent a little more time in Persia sampling some of the strange contrasts offered by that fascinating country. I gave a little lecture to Persian officers on the war in the Desert: here I met General Prince Firooz, a descendant of the former Imperial house who had visited Field-Marshal Sir Claud Jacob when he was commander-in-chief, India. Princess Firooz, the daughter of a Persian merchant from Shiraz, who had made a fortune in Hong-Kong, had been educated in English schools there, and her English was so perfect I could not at first believe that she was not an Edinburgh girl. She took me for a picnic to one of her villages, where one saw the astonishing feudal system of Persia in flower. As we drove up to the gate of the walled village, the population came out respectfully to greet us and brought out

tables and chairs for our meal in the orchard. There seemed to be no sanitation anywhere, but the water bubbled beneath the fruit-trees fresh from the mountainside. A shy maiden wearing a veil who was tending a cow close by became so absorbed in the strangers that the animal wandered away and had to be retrieved by the men of the village.

The whole scene reminded one of a Persian miniature in which persons in gorgeous robes are seen feasting, apparently in a desert, shaded by one solitary tree, beneath which rich flowers are strangely growing.

Zena was arranging the opportunity for me to "do a piece" about the Empress Fawzia. She is a fascinating sitter. The loneliness of a highly sophisticated, English-bred young woman of Alexandria at the Persian Court can readily be imagined. She was teaching the Shah English and together they listened in, for practice, to the B.B.C. news bulletins. The Shah asked our legation for a copy of the Beveridge Report, not the summary published by the Stationery Office, but the full text. You could picture the poor young queen trying to explain some of Sir William's economic technicalities. . . .

If one hundred years from now the story of this young queen becomes the theme for a film, as well it might, then I declare that only the most beautiful actress in the Hollywood of that day must play the part. I don't believe so exquisite a creature has sat on any throne since Eugenie was Empress of the French.

My last 'story' in Persia was the visit of the Duke of Gloucester when for the first time in history, the Red Army took part in a ceremonial parade in honour of a member of the British royal family. It was an astonishing picture—the blazing, sandy airport; the Duke stepping out of his plane in shorts and topee, the Red Army guard of honour, magnificent in white gloves, presenting arms as the band played "God Save the King," the Duke driving through the streets in the Shah's Rolls-Royce with an enormous British Royal Standard on the bonnet.

I travelled down to the Gulf on the Trans-Iranian railway, through the most majestic mountains. It was like crossing the Rockies on the Canadian Pacific. During the night the train broke in two and I was in the part left behind. But after three

days on the line, we reached Ahwaz, and a hot motor ride over the South Persian desert brought me to Basra, whence I was to take the Indian flying boat back to Cairo and the new desert campaign which some of us 'felt' was in the wind.

At Basra, I met Alan Moorehead returning from India and, to celebrate an unexpected coming-together, we wrote a joint article which concluded thus : " Flying together across Palestine to Cairo we find things tenser than they were two months ago. Like waves that gather themselves again and again it looks to us as though the Desert Armies were about to break on one another."

This was published on May 26th, 1942. Next day Rommel attacked our Gazala line. The battle of Bir Hacheim was on.

Among all the wrong guesses that journalists make, it is pleasant to remember one occasion when one has guessed right. People came up to congratulate us, saying, " How on *earth* did you know ? "

We tried not to look too complacent, nor to say anything that might give the show away.

## CHAPTER TEN

### ONE HOP AHEAD OF ROMMEL

"JERRY's been doing a lot of swanning around south of the Bardia-Tobruk road—he doesn't seem to have made up his mind what to do next."

The speaker was one of our cavalrymen in tanks, and his phrase—the latest piece of desert slang which will surely clamber into the language alongside such immortalities as "Everything's laid on"—aptly described Rommel's course of action since the fatal thirteenth of June, 1942, when General Messervy and our other tank commanders, having had their armoured strength reduced from some 300 to only 70 tanks in the shocking 'ambush' by Rommel's 88-millimetre guns, were obliged to recommend that the Gazala line be abandoned. General Klopper's South African division, together with the Guards and some Indian regiments, had fallen back into Tobruk and the box at el Adem was still holding, but the western perimeter of Tobruk was now almost closed up again and, once el Adem fell, it seemed likely that the "Tobruk Rats" (although a different set of men) would be back where they were over a year before.

Alan Moorehead had been in the desert during the greater part of the Gazala battles and I had been in Cairo. But now, after the fell thirteenth, Alan had returned to base to try to get some explanatory 'pieces' through the censorship (for the bewildered British public anxiously demanded to be told what had gone wrong) and I had taken his place.

On June 16th I set out to try to get into Tobruk and, on the road up, not far from Bardia, I met this tankman who put me in the picture in his own inimitable way.

It was on that same day that I heard "El Alamein" mentioned for the first time, in a serious way. A staff officer I knew told me, " 'Strictly off the record,' old boy, I think you'll find



a little place called Alamein is going to be rather important from now on."

"Alamein?" I said vaguely, "you mean that little railway station somewhere around those lakes near the sea?"

"That's the ticket. That's where we are going to fall back to, if we have to."

"But surely, that's practically in Alex., isn't it?"

"Sixty miles away, old boy."

Tobruk had not fallen then. It was not even "sealed up." And there seemed to be plenty of defensive strength left still in the Egyptian frontier line, which had served us so long before. But what we did not know then was that nearly all those tanks we had lost on June 13th were in enemy hands. There was no hope of salvaging our wrecks. And back in the Nile Valley there were precious few tanks left. The Desert Army, stripped of armour, was like a snail without its shell. Had I understood the full extent of our disaster, I would not have tried to get into Tobruk. But I wanted to be in on its second siege from the start, for I felt sure that it would not last long. Surely, one reasoned, our command would not leave troops in there again, let the siege begin, unless a counter-offensive was already planned, to push back from the frontier and crush Rommel back upon the Tobruk 'hedgehog,' as we had crushed him before.

So, with Christopher Buckley of the *Daily Telegraph*, I went up to that old friend of the British public, the battered township of Bardia. I remembered Lord Woolton's slogan, "You can't have beef, and Bardia," as, sitting on the floor of the ruined church I enjoyed both in the shape of an excellent bully beef stew and a view over the Mediterranean that recalled Clovelly and Hartland Point combined. Bardia was still a picture postcard place. A swim in the harbour beat the Lido any day. A night spent in a cottage with its roof blasted off was, however, a trifle eerie. There was no sound save the lapping of the waves against the rocks hundreds of feet below and the firm tread of sentries posted against an attempt to land from the sea or from the air.

During the night Nazi planes 'stooged around' low and we had to be on the *qui vive* lest at any moment they rain airborne invaders upon us.

At first light we heard a bustle in the street. It was the naval garrison pulling out. They told us they had been ordered to return to Alexandria, and when we asked who was remaining in Bardia, they replied, "No one." So we were not going to try to hold the place. . . . Evidently, Tobruk was going to be sealed off soon, and the rest of the army must be retreating to the frontier. We hastened to pack and get away. We wrote a last story out of Bardia and gave the 'copy' to the naval boys. The White Ensign was hauled down from the villa they had called "Admiralty House." Soon there was not a soul left in Bardia. The rats, and a couple of mangy cats, had the place to themselves.

At the crossroads we turned westward along the Tobruk road. We had a roofspotter on both of our trucks. Christopher—whom I called the "Bishop" because he made the most of the ecclesiastical delivery with which Nature had dowered him to utter racy remarks in pious tones—was in his best form. And the circumstances in which we found ourselves heightened one's appreciation of any witticism. When I hoisted my typewriter above my head and shouted, "Forward, for the honour of Public Relations!" I was agreeably surprised to find that people thought I was being funny. Right then, I thought I was pretty funny myself.

We hadn't gone far when we met a large number of trucks coming down the road. Some of them had come from Gambut which the Germans had occupied during the night. Others had just left the landing-ground at Beheira whence they had evacuated all stores, lest the Germans surprise the place from the south. German columns were roaming along the Trigh Capuzzo and in places, we were told, overlooked the Tobruk road from the escarpment. They were 'popping off' at transport moving along the road, and had cut it here and there. But it was still possible, we heard, for armoured cars to get through to Tobruk. So we went on, hoping to find some armoured cars. . . .

Six miles from Gambut, when we were straining our eyes in expectation of seeing a German vehicle appear out of the dancing heat-haze ahead at any moment, we ran into a Free French ambulance running the gauntlet back from Tobruk, whose driver told us he had been lucky to get through. German armoured cars, he said, were lying in wait farther on, in a position to shell

the road if anything worthwhile came up it. He advised us to be discreet and to withdraw a few miles.

We took his advice. In so doing, we picked up a strange assortment of strays along the wayside. First was a little white dog, probably fifth column because he answered only to a few words in German. The animal must have strayed away from his master during the night. He was howling in the ditch, very hungry. We gave him biscuits and put him in the back of our truck.

The desert around us was desolation. The road ribboned endlessly into the distance. Not a vestige of humanity in sight, save wrecked vehicles here and there. Yet here was something human. An R.A.S.C. driver, coated in sand, pulled himself wearily out of an overturned wagon and hailed us. Evacuating in the dark his lorry, filled with petrol, had overturned, and he had been ordered to stay on guard until help came. But, in the haste of the withdrawal, someone had forgotten him. If we had not passed by, he would presumably have stayed there until the Germans came up. We loaded all his petrol we had room for, then set fire to the rest.

The zest with which one destroys things on such occasions reveals, to my mind, the vandalism which lurks in every one—not far beneath the surface.

A little later we picked up a couple of Indian soldiers and then a Senussi warrior who had been fighting for the Allies ever since Wavell's first campaign. Next, an R.A.F. mechanic who had been asleep when his aerodrome had been evacuated, and had thus got left behind.

So we trundled along with our load of refugees—two war correspondents, two Indians, the aircraftsman, the soldier, the Senussi and the little white dog.

Behind us there suddenly appeared out of a cloud of dust a fast-moving vehicle. We could see a man's head sticking out of its trapdoor. A German armoured car? There seemed little doubt about it, and we increased our pace.

After a race of several miles our pursuer caught up with us. He turned out to be a British major in a staff car of strange design, and he rallied us for retreating at such speed. He himself had

just run into a Nazi armoured car a few miles back and was retiring until he came across a defensible position.

"Why not hold the road here?" the major declared. He was an officer of a technical branch and had the sanguine attitude to battle of the non-fighting soldier. However, he was a most energetic man. Muttering that it gave him a pain in the neck to see people retreat when it wasn't necessary, he had soon organised our little party of refugees to hold a line across the road until regular reinforcements could come up.

War correspondents, of course, aren't permitted to bear arms and in such situations are apt to look rather foolish. But Christopher and I looked as aggressive as we knew how, although it's not much consolation to have green correspondents' tabs on your shoulder when you concede that at 500 yards even a Nazi can be excused for mistaking a green tab for a fighting man, and shooting at him accordingly.

We lay down to wait for the first Nazi to appear. I lay in an open drain. I thought of how a clerical reviewer had dismissed one of my wife's novels, "To read Miss Morley is like travelling slowly through a public drain . . ." But this drain was cosy and grass-grown. It was plain that for amateur soldiers, we weren't doing badly. Not one of us was visible. When the Germans arrived they might suppose our trucks had been abandoned, and fall unsuspecting into our trap. Half an hour passed. The enemy did not appear. The major grew impatient.

"What's happened to the bastards? They were following *me* fast enough. . . ."

We didn't think it tactful to remind him that *we* had nearly thrust our accelerators through the floor in our efforts to get away from *him*, and yet he had overhauled us. He paced up and down in thought. Then, for the first time, he noticed that Christopher and I were non-combatants, so he decided to use us as despatch riders.

We were sent off down the road in one truck to report the situation and summon reinforcements. We hadn't gone far when we ran into a couple of our armoured cars 'swanning along' and looking for trouble. We told them where they could find it.

We decided then that it was too late to try to get through to

Tobruk. Later that day, we learned, the Germans did approach that little road block. But by that time there was quite a reception party awaiting them. The Germans turned back.

Demolitions in what would soon be a no man's land around Bardia were now going on apace. Everywhere on the horizon black clouds of smoke arose from our burning dumps. Everywhere the naturally depressing landscape acquired an infernal lustre as fires and explosions marked points where Nazi hopes for loot and booty were going up in smoke.

We saw General Ritchie driving in an open car near Capuzzo. His face was quite impassive.

"Shall I say in my despatch—'He looks confident'?" I asked Christopher. But I knew the answer. General Ritchie had no grounds for feeling confident. Never since the Army of the Nile was first formed had our position in Egypt been so desperate. At that very moment, in fact, Auchinleck was relieving Ritchie of his command and moving up into the desert himself to take charge.

From the top of Hellfire Pass you could see columns of our reinforcements moving like ants over the plain. Every road and desert track was full. And the skies were empty. We who had missed so many opportunities ourselves now saw Rommel commit a major blunder. Just when we were giving him wonderful targets, the Luftwaffe was grounded. Our whole disengagement from the Tobruk area was taking place so smoothly because there was no aerial interference.

On June 20th Christopher and I stood inside the defences at the top of Sollum. It still looked as though we intended to hold the frontier towards which Rommel—at the same moment as he fell with full fury upon Tobruk—was sending out exploring fingers. Until word came that Tobruk had been attacked, none of us knew whether the first assault might not come at Hellfire Pass. So there was a certain tenseness, a sense of working against the clock.

An American Honey tank came to us across the desert as we headed once more towards Bardia. Hailing us, its commander asked where we were going and when we told him, said, "You're too late. Jerry's there already."

He said he was going to patrol outside the wire and suggested we follow him. The NAAFI at Capuzzo, he said, was "having a clearance sale." We might get out there and see what we could get. But when we reached the wire, the entrance had already been closed and mined. So our friend radioed to ask for instructions.

"Hallo, hallo," he called chirpily. "Here's one from Clark Gable. I am at Point Z. What instructions? Over to you, over."

Swiftly H.Q. told "Clark Gable" to get some of the mines lifted and go on outside the wire.

A dull thudding of gunfire came from the direction of Bardia and outside the wire we saw a German armoured car which had come too close in that morning, still burning like a tar barrel to which a match has been applied.

Before the Honey moved off on its job, I asked the crew how they thought things were going.

"Bit thin on the ground, aren't we?" one of them said. "But I suppose the frontier will hold."

"It always has before," said another, who had forgotten that Graziani had got beyond Sidi Barrani.

We knew now that Tobruk was being attacked, but none of us was prepared for its fall. . . .

We spent that night down on the Buq Buq plain, back in Egypt. When we went to battle headquarters of Eighth Army for a morning conference, we noticed a few long faces. Then the blow fell.

"Shortly after 7 o'clock this Sunday morning," said a staff officer, reading out an official report, "Tobruk fell. The garrison fought for twenty-six hours against overwhelming tank strength which, once having broken into the perimeter from the Bardia road direction (always the weakest side) fanned out and overran our positions within one by one. The fortress commander, Major-General Klopper, was in radio touch with us here until 7 a.m. when he said 'Good-bye, I am now closing down for good.'"

We had now lost not only the greater part of our armour but also 25,000 troops and an enormous quantity of stores and transport in Tobruk—so much transport, in particular, that for

months afterwards on the desert you could never really tell which was friend or foe, because the enemy were using so many British lorries.

But it was an hour or two before the full import of this shocking thing had sunk into our minds.

Some of us suggested going up to the frontier again, to be present when the attack came. But we were told that the frontier was not going to be defended. A retiring action would be fought at least as far back as Mersah Matruh. Rommel was going to be permitted to advance farther than the despised Graziani had done ! That really brought things home to us.

Later, on June 22, Army H.Q. moved back from near Sidi Barrani to Bagush, and we found ourselves back at the spot whence General Cunningham had sallied forth in 1941, back in our health resort where "Baron Reuben" had once held court. The lagoon looked just the same and our tents were still there, but we were mortified when a staff officer came in and said he must commandeer our tentage for the staff of the A.O.C. Western desert, who would move in on the morrow.

We protested bitterly : we had been there so long, the little huddle of tents seemed like home in a world that was crashing. We even rang up G.H.Q. in Cairo to lodge our solemn protest with our 'boss,' the Director of Public Relations. None of us seemed to realise that the camp was no longer *ours* to be taken from us. Next day we moved out, feeling like Madame Ranevsky when her Cherry Orchard is being cut down ; but our successors did not enjoy their inheritance long. In a few days the Germans had overrun the place and we were all of us right back on a smelly site off the main road, well on the *wrong* side of Alexandria. But at that time we thought Matruh would hold, that Daba *might* hold. We could not adjust our digestions to cope with the bitter pill of Alamein . . .

I sat by the seashore in our new camp, a few miles east of Bagush. It was June 24th. Most of the correspondents had returned to Cairo. Only Richard McMillan of U.P., Crockett of A.P., Hetherington the Australian, Matt Halton the Canadian and myself remained in the desert. Around me New Zealand sappers were erecting barbed wire defences which none of us

believed could hold the Germans for five minutes ; but there was a tiny " Box " at Bagush, and this was supposed to be an extension of it.

Earlier that day I had gone into Matruh. There was an air of expectancy there. The numerically great New Zealand division was preparing to withstand a siege, though they knew that there was not an inch of the terrain into which Rommel's 88-millimetre guns mounted on tank chassis could not fire.

" Well, Egypt is being invaded," thought I, as I sat by the sad salt waves, " and I ought to have a dramatic tale to tell, but it's the little things that seem to count now. I can't pound much of a despatch out of this, even though the Boche is getting mighty close, and is already sniffing around Mersah Matruh like a dog around a lamp-post."

As I sit typing I become somewhat in the way of the New Zealanders who are laying the wire. One of them murmurs " Excuse me," and I move aside. His politeness is not in the least ironical. It's just part of the funny unreal atmosphere of this place, once a British base miles away from the fighting area but now a front line fortress—and a weak one at that. The Enzeds pause a moment while I take their pictures ; then we both get on with our work.

Already they are preparing to move camp again, farther back. The tents are being taken down, our telephone lies disconnected on the sand. But our rococo inn sign with its " All-seeing Eye " and its scrolls of pink tape still swings in the sea breeze. It's a beautiful afternoon with balloon-like white clouds billowing over the sea. All seems at peace. It is almost as though it was England, not Egypt, that was being invaded. Some of us have been in Egypt so long that truly we have begun to regard it as a second home. We curse flies and climate ; yet Cairo and Alexandria have become dear to us. That the good places of Egypt should be threatened by the Boche seems almost as bad as though it were towards Oxford or Blackpool that Rommel was marching.

Despite our loss of tanks, I believe our lack of anything to compete with the 88-millimetre gun is even more serious to-day. It takes a lot of 25-pounders—good as they are—to equal one 88-millimetre. And at this moment, I suppose we need about



400 25-pounders if we are going to save Egypt. General Scott of the U.S. Army, an old gunner who has been sent into the desert to 'observe' for Roosevelt, drops in and over a mug of tea tells us that there are hundreds of big self-propelled guns being manufactured now in America, but alas they cannot reach here in time. Only enough 25-pounders can save us now.

"We are sending you everything we can," adds General Scott. "Churchill arranged that in Washington, as soon as Tobruk fell, but figure out for yourself how long it will take to reach here . . . I'm afraid your Auchinleck is going to have to save the day here all on his own."

Even as he spoke, the big Sherman tanks of the 1st U.S. armoured division were being taken away from them to be sent to Egypt; and thanks in good measure to them, we won Alamein four months later. But we cannot envisage a counter-attack now. All we ask is that, by some miracle, the thin defences at Alamein will hold.

Well, someone is shouting through the dusk that it's time to strike camp again. German flares are going up over the desert beyond Fuka. . . .

On June 26th the order came to withdraw right back beyond Alexandria. The remains of the P.R. unit set off down the desert road, which was jammed with vehicles two abreast, all streaming back into the Delta. It was, I think, the most depressing sight I ever saw. It looked like the wreckage of an army. . . . *Everything* that could be put on wheels was on the road. One even saw lightly damaged Boston bombers being towed along on their tricycle undercarriages, their wings a danger to every passing vehicle as they overhung the road. At one airfield near Daba, as the enemy approached, they actually *taxied* the machines that could not fly away over the desert, driving them to safety like lorries . . .

The traffic jam on the road held us up for hours and we were making about three miles in each hour. About noon I espied a small landing-ground that was packing up. An old "Bombay" was squatting in the sun and I secured a passage on board. But we were not to take off until everything else there had been taken

away. So I sat under the wing all day, nursing the last red bag containing despatches from the desert, which I was going to take to Cairo.

At four in the afternoon the lumbering old plane took off. We stooged along at 80 miles an hour, seeing the terrain over which the battle for Egypt was going to be fought through the eyes of a Nazi airman—although actually no enemy reconnaissance plane could have got so close a look over our dispositions for the defence of Egypt, for we skimmed a few feet above the surface of the desert, clearing the tops of British trucks and tents by a narrow margin.

I saw all Dan Pienaar's South Africans spread out beneath me. You got impressionistic close-ups of men on the eve of battle—a man shaving with a cut-throat razor, gunners shoving their weapons into position, a staff officer seated on a canvas chair telephoning, the red flannel grandly gleaming on hat and uniform—a man washing his clothes in an old petrol tin. I winced when one quick-on-the-trigger fellow swung round on hearing our roaring approach with his tommy-gun pointed upward. But he saw our R.A.F. insignia in time and did not fire. Hedge-hopping pilots in battle areas must take the risk of being mistaken for a ground-strafting Jerry, that's all there is to it.

The desert below was virginal ; it had never been fought over. The surface was gritty and hard, affording good going. Cyrenaica was rutted and pitted all over with the marks of thousands of wheels and tank-tracks. This desert smoothly invited the disfiguring imprint of mechanised war.

We skirted the Kattara Depression over an area which the map marks as "impassable by cars." The cartographer spoke truly. No trace of vehicle marks was visible for miles, and I couldn't believe that a boy on a bicycle could pass over that salt, soggy surface without sinking in. As for a prime macaroni-fed Bersaglieri on a bicycle—such as formed the spearhead of Rommel's advance down the coast road—the idea was grotesque.

It was curious to see the Bedouin still living on the desert, not far from the British positions, with their herds of goats and camels. Their tents looked rather like those which sprout from the sides

of British staff-cars ; one hoped the harmless creatures didn't get strafed in consequence.

Landing at a Delta airfield called Khanka I found no sign of emergency or alarm. The fellaheen pursued their immemorial way, tilling the fields, leading strings of camels loaded with produce to market or jogging homeward on donkeys, carrying parasols to keep off the evening sun.

In Cairo the tone seemed pretty sane and sober. The stock market had staggered, but then it always did when the desert war flared up after a lull. I felt it was a good thing Nahas and the Wafd were in power : they were keeping a firm hand on the tiller. Special ordinances had been passed decreeing imprisonment for rumour-mongers or those failing to report suspicious movements. Every one was enjoined to be on the watch for parachutists.

That first night in from the desert I made a quick round of the bars. The terraces were crowded far into the crisp moonlit night ; dance bands played, roses bloomed, laughter still ruled. Out there whence I had flown there was the terrifying rumbling and squeaking of tanks manœuvring at night, the pinging bark of their guns.

Here the only percussion came from the ghourds and drums of conga orchestras. Cairo danced.

Yet 'preparedness' among Egyptian officials was good. One small example : a British war correspondent named Stuart Emeny arrived and his office cabled home "EMENY ARRIVED." An understandable mistake occurred and the message went—"Enemy arrived." An indignant Egyptian official stopped the cable, protesting, "The enemy is still many miles from Cairo—this is fifth column work !"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE FIRST VICTORY AT ALAMEIN

ON JUNE 29TH Mersah Matruh was evacuated. Hundreds of the New Zealand garrison had to fight their way out by night. I wrote in my diary, "We seem to be falling back on el Alamein. I feel it's about 50-50 whether we hold Egypt. We shall certainly be *very lucky* to do so."

Alan Moorehead had gone to the desert to take a last look around. He had made plans to evacuate his wife and child to Palestine. On June 30th Rommel had passed Daba and was feeling his way towards the Alamein line, but cautiously. Auchinleck was in the desert personally directing operations, very ably supported by Dan Pienaar and his South Africans, who were holding the place of honour straddling the road and not far from the sea. Here the original Alamein "Box" had been constructed. I had often passed its slender cordons of wire on my way up to the desert but had never imagined for a moment that it would ever be used. In happier days, we had never considered Alamein as 'desert' at all—it seemed almost a suburb of Alexandria when you were approaching that place with hundreds of miles of sand behind you.

The next day, when I was lying abed with "Gypsy Tummy," which comes to every one who visits Egypt sooner or later, a friend came into my room with the report that Rommel had broken through Alamein and was nearing Alexandria. This proved untrue, but when Moorehead returned from the desert that night I had never seen him so gloomy. He spoke of a general evacuation of Egypt and rushed off to see that his family got away. Christopher Buckley, who was with him, was equally depressed. He would not stay for a drink, but went off to pack his bag and get petrol for his car. It was the end, he said.

It was arranged that I should stay with the Desert Army and that Alan should follow wherever G.H.Q. might lead. They could

hear the guns in the streets of Alexandria. Streams of Jewish refugees began arriving in Cairo. Some of them said they had been unnerved by the behaviour of the staff of the Alexandria naval base, who had evacuated the city with more ostentation than discretion. Armenians and some Greeks came with them, but most of the Greeks stayed behind. They knew there was nowhere for them to evacuate to—the trains and planes going south were already packed with bigger game. Frank Gervasi, of *Colliers*, leaving for South Africa by a previous order of his paper, told me he was distressed by the attitude of some of the American Legation who seemed to have forgotten that they had become belligerents more than 6 months earlier. American aircraft kept up a shuttle service taking American nationals down to Khartoum, and there was not much stoicism visible among the permanent U.S. officials. Yet it would not be fair to single out Americans in this respect. No one coming back from the desert could fail to be struck by the atmosphere of 'Flap' among the 'base wallahs.' The chimneys of G.H.Q. belched out black smoke as a great tonnage of documents was destroyed. Many people who should have known better lent themselves to the circulation of rumours. As I lay in bed, a friend came round to warn me to arise and pack without more delay because a German armoured division had 'got loose' and was heading straight for Cairo around the edge of the Kattara Depression. It would be at Mena House in time for breakfast next morning, I was assured. But I felt too unwell to take the warning seriously; and the atmosphere among ordinary civilians in Cairo continued so carefree that one had difficulty in believing such things, in any case.

On July 2nd I arose and prepared to return to the desert. The news, if no better, was not worse. The first battle of Alamein which had been joined on the previous day was raging with unabated fury, but so far without a decision. That night I dined on a hotel roof with a Polish officer; Willie Forrest, Princess de Faucigny-Lucinge and Madame Darr were there, and we all discussed where we would go if flight became necessary. The three men, who all knew Teheran, told the women of its beauties, its desirability as a haven from Rommel. In the distance a band played "Tangerine." The moon was full, the night glorious.

Next morning I drove up towards Alamein. Paul Bewsher was with me. He had not been in the desert before. He was seeing it in its most exciting perspective and was not a bit depressed, as I was, to see army headquarters way back in a suburb of Alexandria. To him everything wore the romantic sheen of novelty. We spent the night at Amriya with bombers taking off on the open desert all around us on non-stop bombing missions. The tired Axis troops were being pounded all the time from the air and blasted incessantly by our guns in the hope that they would be too harassed to carry their offensive right through to its end, but he obliged to halt at Alamein and re-form. By which time we hoped to be ready to deal with them.

The Australians were pouring down from Palestine to lend a hand. As their traffic passed the approaches to Alexandria, it encountered what appeared to be a mass demonstration of the fair ladies of that city, drawn up on the roadside. By a coincidence that was, after all, not so strange, all these ladies seemed to be of Italian origin. They carried plenty of good things—fruit, chocolate and so on—and the Aussies gratefully relieved them of these gifts. Shamefaced, the women handed over what they had brought.

They were a polite '5th column' who had gone out to meet what they fondly believed was the victorious Italian Army, but had encountered the Australians instead, going the wrong way! Some of the generous creatures, it was said, even wore panties put together out of treasured Italian flags! But in cookies and deciduous fruits, at least, they lost their little all to the Australians that day. . . .

On the morning of July 4th I drove straight into the Alamein "Box." In an observation post just off the road I was able to watch an armoured battle develop which led to a German withdrawal after a considerable loss of tanks and of men. Thirty German tanks were destroyed for sure and the enemy left 500 vehicles in our hands by the end of the day. Out on a ridge to the south I could see tanks and vehicles burning. Our artillery was firing without let-up. With the naked eye I could see swarms of vehicles moving about on the ridge and it was thrilling to see that the general tendency was westwards—westwards away from Egypt, and pushing the enemy back whence he came. Directly

before me the flashes of our guns were like so many matches being struck in quick succession on the sandy plateau, which swirled with the dust kicked up by hundreds of trucks. The sharper, more staccato crack of anti-tank guns rose now and then above the general rumble of the battle. It was very much a gunners' show. Our precious tanks were not being hazarded; they were firing from hull-down positions or taking advantage of dead ground to manœuvre close to the enemy, to fire and then withdraw again out of range.

I thought of the prediction an important German prisoner had made the day before: "Rommel has wonderful energy himself but he drives us too hard and some of us can't take much more of this . . . rest we must have soon."

Well, some of the men out there in those gutted tanks have won the rest which lasts for ever. These tanks had rushed our positions with the infantry not riding on the backs, as the Russians do, but jog-trotting along behind. When the tanks were beaten back, the unfortunate infantry were exposed like snails outside their shells and were cut down.

The German artillery weren't very active. They lobbed an occasional one in our direction but did no damage except to a small dove which was brought into our O.P., with its wings blown off, but still alive. The captain in charge put it in his dugout, where after a while its shattered nerves improved and it was even able to take a little nourishment. During the course of the battle reports on the dove's health kept coming through. The captain said to me:

"I'm one of these old-fashioned nature lovers—you know, the sort of chap who writes to the paper about the first cuckoo, and all that."

Hearing that General Pienaar was nearby, I went off to call on him. On the way we were machine-gunned by three fighters, quite accidentally and without the least ill-will. Two M.E.s were trying to get on the tail of a Kittyhawk, and in diving to earth happened to choose for a battleground the little patch of desert where we chanced to be. The sound of machine-guns rattling made us jump out and dive for cover. Concentrating on their mutual destruction, the three fighters roared over us only

100 feet up then, wheeling, passed over us again. Hundreds of bullets streamed into the sand around us. Lying between two rocks, one kept swivelling around as the aircraft altered course trying not to lie lengthwise on to the stream of bullets but to present the smallest possible target.

A frightened lizard added to my discomforture by running over my neck. Fifty yards away three camels ran around in circles, grotesquely discomfited, while the camel driver picked up his robe and ran like a gazelle to the very doubtful shelter of a Bedouin tent.

It was an immense relief when the running dogfight drew away and the afternoon was golden and peaceful again.

I passed some troops waiting to go into action. What cardinal good sense men have in such moments ! No sooner halted than they unrolled a sort of awning from the side of their armoured vehicles which gave them pleasant shade beneath which to while away an hour with a magazine before the time came to advance.

Dan Pienaar was sitting on the step of his car, looking quite jaunty. He told me that for two days he had felt anxious but now the situation was clearing up. In his downright manner, interspersed with many picturesque expletives, he said, "You can quote me for this. Master Rommel will not get Alexandria, he will not get the Canal, he will never dine in Cairo—unless as a tourist after the war. I've just seen Auchinleck. There is a man for you ! You know I have the reputation of a quarrelsome fellow, they say I cross swords with all the generals, but I believe we have a great commander in the Auk and that before long Master Rommel will be admitting this himself. Rommel is a crafty fox, but we will be craftier. The Auk is handling this in a masterly fashion—I never met a general who inspired men more. I am confident that before long we will turn this defeat into victory, preserve the Nile and throw the Hun out of Egypt."

Alas, Dan did not live to see his words come true ; nor did Auchinleck remain in the desert to implement them.

But on that day, July 4th, the *first* battle of Alamein was won. Rommel was stopped stone-cold at Alamein by Auchinleck, Pienaar, the gunners of the Eighth Army and the bombers of the Desert Air Force.



Their work that day made the second victory possible. But for it, "Monty" would have to find another road to fame. No doubt fame would have found him anyhow; but it would not have been as the victor of Alamein, for Rommel would have been on the Nile and Alamein would have been remembered by our defeated troops merely for what it was—a whistle-stop with a second-class waiting-room where an old poster fluttered in the desert wind—"Spend Your Holidays in Sunny Palestine."

It was hard to comprehend that this decisive battle on which the fate of fifty million people in the Middle East and a strategic area vital to all the United Nations depended, was being fought out over a terrain not much bigger than the field of Waterloo. The enemy had not attempted to spread himself over the whole 35-mile gap between the Kattara depression and the sea, but was holding a line only 15 miles long. At right angles to his line lay the Ruweisat ridge, a prominence resembling the Hog's Back in Surrey, which ran in an easterly direction as far back as the railway station and Arab village of el Imayid. This ridge was controlled by us: an extension of it, which ran westward of Alamein, was in the hands of the enemy. The remnants of the two German panzer divisions were sitting on it. Rommel had patrols out in the desert to the south covering his long flank, about which he seemed understandably nervous for, jammed into the triangle of which the Alamein Box formed the right angle, were all the divisions which had made his advance in mass possible. And he must have feared an advance by us upon Daba with the object of nipping off all the flashy Italian goods in his shop window—Brescia, Pavia, Sabratha, Trieste, Trento, Littorio and Arriete, the Italian divisions which formed the bulk of his army.

Parallel with the smallness of the front was its astonishing accessibility. Had sightseers been permitted, it would have been easy to run excursions from Alexandria to see the battle and return in an afternoon. Both our vehicles broke down on the following day and had to go into workshops in Alexandria. While they were being repaired we sat on the beach at Sidi Bish, then had an excellent lunch at the Petit Coin de France, and two hours later were back on the battlefield—in time to have a cup of tea at

divisional headquarters. Very much as though the Germans were at Dover and the road was clear enough to permit one, after lunching at Simpsons, to drive down to the front line in a couple of hours.

Despite the proximity of the battle, I thought the good people of Alexandria were behaving with commendable sang-froid, though perhaps that was in their tradition. Since Cæsar fought Antony in their backyard, they have had other lessons in the art of keeping cool while battles of historical importance were being fought out around them. A tiger had escaped from the Alexandria Zoo and there was some apprehension lest one ran into him on the Promenade. But I found little anxiety lest Rommel put in an appearance in the same place. And these people did not yet know that the enemy had been fought to a halt.

One of the most curious and least expected legacies of British rule which this crisis brought out was a tendency among the peoples of Egypt to their own variant of British phlegm, and even to that famous English 'complacency' we hear so much about at home. Without a doubt, the behaviour of the very mixed town populations during the period when Rommel was bearing down on them with apparently irresistible momentum was admirable. It was quite obvious that the enemy radio was doing its best to create panic in the rear. But the people did not panic and the fifth column, due largely to the firm hand shown by the Wafdist Government, did not dare to emerge. The vast mass of fellaheen or poor workers earning their pitiful piastres a day could not of course have afforded to flee, even had they felt so inclined. But among the Effendi class and the large foreign colonies, a rush to evacuate would have played havoc with communications and hampered the movement of troops. That no such panic developed was due largely to the splendid behaviour of the Greeks.

In every little town and village you find small Greek traders and shopkeepers. Although assimilated into the life of Egypt, they never forgot they were our fighting allies. They kept morale high and were vigilant against traitors. Thus did our abortive campaign in Greece bring us a delayed dividend of goodwill at a vital moment.

Black sheep there were, of course. A few Anglo-Levantine magnates who in good times liked to wrap themselves up in the

Union Jack, now draped their magnificent villas in dust sheets and leaving these symbolic white flags behind them, ran like Wildebeeste in the general direction of South Africa. One millionaire who flew to Johannesburg two years earlier when Graziani threatened, put an even greater distance between himself and Rommel. Some who ran so fast that they omitted to get exit permits, were to find it difficult to get back into Egypt when they wanted to do so.

But nearly all holders of British passports and Greeks and Egyptians stood firm. Thirty thousand British subjects including Cypriots and Maltese obeyed orders to stay put and go on working as steadfastly as people in Kent or Middlesex would have done if the Germans had landed at Dover. This took a very great deal of doing when men of the British forces were obviously preparing to leave and I don't think these people have ever received fitting recognition for their courage.

Alexandria truly presented a remarkable spectacle. The races at the Sporting Club were crowded and the bathing-beaches were filled. Alexandria, as one of the finest *plages* in the Mediterranean, did not intend that Rommel should spoil its season, which was then at its height.

We saw beautiful Greek girls parading up and down in the latest American swimming suits. Many girls had three suits at least because the sea was so warm that one bathed repeatedly, donning a dry suit for lunch or tea under the awnings of beach bungalows which were furnished like drawing-rooms, with kitchenettes in the rear. (No sandy sandwiches out of cardboard boxes here, but a regular luncheon served at table !)

The sight of so many able-bodied young men in silk suits and co-respondent shoes gave one a slight jolt with the enemy so close at hand, but of course Egypt was non-belligerent and no doubt some of them would have preferred to fight, had this been politically possible. Once or twice a day an enemy plane came over and the guns opened up, but nobody took any notice. Indeed gunfire *could* not intrude much when gramophones were grinding out swing tunes and hundreds of children were laughing and playing in the surf.

People under the beach umbrellas were reading Arabic

reviews which poked fun at citizens who got 'windy.' The magazine *Akher Saa* had a cartoon of a panicky pasha scurrying across the map towards the Kattara Depression whither he was going because "I'm told the Germans can't get there."

I met Maro Vatimbella, the Greek artist who was an old Roedean girl, on the beach. With her was her cousin, escaped from the homeland not long since, who always carried £600 in all sorts of currencies on her person lest the Germans catch up with her again. I 'watched her bag' for her while she went into the sea. It had evidently not occurred to her that the time for another evacuation might be at hand.

I had a very pleasant drink with Maro and her young friends in bathing-suits. Then I went up to the desert again. By nightfall we were again bedded down under the stars, near the tanks of the Gloucestershire Hussars, on the top of Ruweisat Ridge.

That was the atmosphere of those weeks of waiting after Auchinleck had brought Rommel to a halt. Two counter-attacks on a considerable scale were launched by us. The Australians took Tel el Eissa, were pushed out of it again, but held tight to its approaches. A tank assault was launched in the centre, but proved costly. Behind the line, back in the Delta, a fresh attacking force was feverishly being built up; on the line itself, defences were built in depth almost as far back as Burg el Arab. But for the men of Alamein, this was a period when one kept thinking of the clean city of Alexandria behind one, of the chance of snatching a small spell of leave there among the trees and the shady streets.

Alexandria was always a popular place with the troops. In it they now felt they were defending something worth while. Their backs were up against something solid and pleasant. And its proximity gave them good things—fresh meat and vegetables, even some drink.

Even the men down on the edge of the Kattara depression—a Rider Haggard country of precipitous outcrops, pinkish hills and swinish flies—did not feel so isolated. The Rifle Brigade officers there told me they had their 'elevenses' of gin and lime each morning.

During those weeks at Alamein our tactical position was always serious. Yet I never knew the Desert Army in happier temper.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### WINSTON AND MONTY

I WELL remember the first occasion on which General Montgomery appeared at Alamein.

I was with the Australians just off the road near the sea when a motorcade approached us. A small man wearing a 'Digger's' hat got out and began talking to men at the side of the road.

"Who's that funny little guy?" asked an Australian near me.

"Don't know—never seen him before," I replied, without interest. Then, "What on earth has he got in his hat?"

What he *had* was a collection of cap badges of every unit then serving in Eighth Army, a highly unorthodox thing for a general to do although we were used to unorthodoxy by that time for had not another odd little man, a plump one, wearing a white Bombay bowler and carrying a sunshade, jumped out of another such motorcade a week before and, to every one's stupefaction, revealed himself as Winston Churchill? On this his first appearance Montgomery created no stir. He came to the desert without any 'build-up.' But in a very short space he had created a 'build-up' for himself—one of such proportions as no British soldier had received since the days of Kitchener.

In so doing I believe he showed a wise psychological insight. Rommel had been 'built-up' by the British press into a great figure, largely because one could write freely of the enemy's plans when one could not mention our own. Many of our own men in the desert had quite an affection for the German. Our own generals were not supposed to be talked about; publicity which verged ever so slightly upon the personal was regarded as improper by the Public Relations department, and General Alexander, on taking over the Middle East command, told us all personally he did not want to be written about, lest the enemy form an estimate of his plans through reading his character. The Public Relations people had asked war correspondents to go slow

on stories about Rommel because we had made him into quite a bogey man. I could not see the sense in this, believing it to be sound propaganda to give the utmost credit to your adversary, provided you are certain of defeating him, for your own victory then assumes the maximum proportions. Montgomery did not mind what we wrote about Rommel, nor did he mind how much we wrote about him. But he was interested in what we wrote about Montgomery. He was 'co-operative' with the photographers and liked to have pictures taken showing himself taking tea out of a battered mug with private soldiers he met along his way.

Deliberately, I believe, he set out to build himself up in the eyes of an army that had tasted defeat into as great a man as Rommel, a man capable of matching and beating the German general. This was a tonic that did the Desert Army good at that time. They did not much want finesse from their commanders. They rather *wanted* a cocky little general who gave out to all and sundry that he was going to beat Rommel and beat him soon, and that the Eighth Army was going to come back in such a way as to make it the most famous army the war had produced in any land. Behind this apparently gross over-confidence, Montgomery was in possession of facts not then known to the rest of us. He knew what an overwhelming mass of equipment was piling up behind him in Egypt, he knew the Americans were going to land in North Africa. He could afford to be confident. The fact that he himself had no experience of fighting in the desert mattered little, for the day of open desert fighting was past—at least for just so long as the armies remained at Alamein. Here they were locked along a narrow front of trenches, as in the last war. This was no place for 'Jock columns' or 'boxes' or long-range patrols. And Montgomery knew that if he were to break through it would have to be with an old-fashioned steamroller offensive. Alamein was in fact very like the Mannerheim Line, with the Kattara taking the place of Lake Ladoga at one end and the Mediterranean for the Gulf of Finland at the other.

It would be absurd to pretend that Montgomery the man had an instantaneous success in the desert. Montgomery never has been, and is not now, the type of general who appeals to the more

sophisticated. He is not my cup of tea. I like generals with human failings ; generals who drink, like Grant, or who swear nicely, like Pienaar. Like most Englishmen of this day, I am allergic to Puritans, and Montgomery is puritanical to the point of being bad-mannered about it. He refuses to have any one smoke in his presence (which is probably the origin of the many stories which pit Winston and Monty against each other in a humorous sense, as they are undoubtedly opposites in their mode of living). He is self-opinionated and, in my opinion, self-righteous : he has some sense of fun but apparently none of humour or, what is surely more important, no sense of what is ridiculous ; his mind is simple to the point of excluding all considerations but the purely military. It is impossible to conceive of Monty as a great administrator, like Allenby or Wavell. His political knowledge appears to be of the most rudimentary. He is a fighting soldier, with all the shortcomings and all the virtues of the man who regards the military art purely from its most utilitarian aspect.

I believe I am reporting truly when I write that the impression he made upon the war correspondents in the desert in the weeks before Alamein was one of very assiduous, energetic and painstaking mediocrity. Events, you may say, proved us to be wrong. Alamein, and what came after, showed Montgomery to be a great soldier. I agree. Yet from the start we, the very men who with our typewriters and cameras were responsible for building the great Montgomery Legend, felt rather ashamed of the shape our own Frankenstein was assuming. It was distasteful, as time wore on, to see so much of the credit going to Monty, so little to Alexander and Tedder, both splendid men and Tedder in particular, a man of outstanding mental calibre allied to true modesty and charm of character. Distasteful and yet perhaps necessary, if a British champion was to be arrayed against Rommel, that such a man should be a bit over life-size. Well, Monty soon became all of that. And he entered into his part with the same zest with which he did everything, from his swim before dawn to his last cup of tea in his caravan at night.

His legend grew so fast that I find this entry in my diary, a week after the Alamein battle began : " Monty is very cocky. Hear this story to illustrate his mood, ' A diffident man approaches

the Pearly Gates and on being asked by Peter who he is says, "Oh, I am just a psychiatrist."

"'Good,' says Peter, 'come right in ; you are just the man we want. God's not feeling well ; he thinks he's Monty.'"

Then there was the other thumb-nail profile of our champion, attributed to a very eminent person indeed :

"In defeat, indomitable ; in victory, insufferable."

Yet these non-complimentary tales only served to strengthen the legend, for such things are not said of someone for whom affection is not felt.

I first began to appreciate General Montgomery's virtues when I met a cavalry officer of the silly ass type who was very indignant over a visit the army commander had paid to his mess.

"He came in there and started telling us off like schoolboys," he complained. "He actually said we must stop thinking about playing polo and work harder in tanks or we wouldn't be worth our keep !"

To a horsey young man with more money than sense this seemed the final outrage. But if someone like Montgomery had come to the desert two years earlier and spoken thus to some of these brave young exquisites who knew how to die, but not how to fight, perhaps a good many such lives might have been saved, not to mention other lives which had depended upon them.

When Churchill came into the desert he promised the men that nothing would be spared to give them the best weapons available in the quantities necessary for final victory ; and Monty was concerned to see that these weapons would be used to the best advantage. On most days that August and September you could see him walking around among the forward troops getting to know his men and ensuring that they in their turn got to know their weapons so well that man and weapon became one fused instrument of destruction. If Montgomery had been a cavalry man you felt he wouldn't have been satisfied with the Light Brigade itself. He would have demanded a brigade of Centaurs.

When he met the crew of a new 6-pounder anti-tank gun standing by, not actually in the line, he asked them how many rounds they had fired. They told him a considerable number.

"That's not enough," he replied. "Take that gun over there



and fire off one hundred more. There are plenty more rounds where those came from."

Alexander and Montgomery both set a personal example of austerity that had a useful effect on morale at that time. Unable to visit the front often because of his duties at G.H.Q., Alexander refused to use his official residence in Cairo and lived in a tent out in the desert. He washed in a canvas bucket, used an oil lamp in his tent at night, drove to work in a desert vehicle, had his lunch in a NAAFI canteen. In his rare statements he was very cautious—wisely conscious that the Libyan Desert was littered with the reputations of generals whose best had not been good enough, and that the current Cairo jest told of the distinguished commander who, on being given a 'bowler hat,' went on from strength to strength until, being fired a second time, he received a 'bowler hat with bar.'

When you looked into General Alexander's bright and hard blue eyes you sensed how far removed he was from the commander who thinks in terms of "Jolly good shows," who thinks of war in sporting clichés and so risks falling into that good man's treason of playing not to win, but rather "for love of the game." I heard Alexander say that he respected Rommel's ability but that was as far as he was prepared to go. In the life-and-death struggle that lay ahead in the desert you felt Alexander wouldn't be satisfied until Rommel was not merely beaten but until the field-marshal and the flower of his army were resting soundly beneath three inches of sand.

You could feel the refreshing, cold breeze of realism which Alexander and Montgomery brought with them from an England where life was austere and urgent come blowing through the humid corridors of G.H.Q. Men who had been in Egypt two years and more, whose blood had grown thin and whose resistance to that fatalism which is the Orient's most menacing disease, had been lowered, got a shot in the arm from the new troops from home—the Highland Division, the Tyne and Tees and the rest—men trained to bursting point and so impatient to 'get cracking' that they produced a healthy irritation among the older hands. After some time in Egypt it was difficult not to become a bit of a pasha: and despite its proximity, the war was

apt to assume an exotic, unreal quality. You lost that sense of urgency that comes with 48 clothes coupons a year and a low meat intake.

The new men Montgomery brought in were more like Dominion soldiers than English troops used to be. So that Monty's Digger hat became, after all, not so out of place. They placed little emphasis on regimental tradition and they weren't snappy dressers. They seemed more conscious than the original desert army of being citizen soldiers for whom the war was entirely without glamour and whose dominating thought was to get the whole bloody business over with as fast as possible in order to start living a rational life again. You didn't see them on the terrace at Shepheard's or conducting "Gezireh Lovelies" to the races. They were not Puritans, like their commanding general. But we older hands, having had our share of cavaliers out there (some never returned from Beda Fomm and Sidi Rezegh) could not help feeling that if a little of the spirit of Cromwell's new model army was now flowing into Egypt, it would do us all good.

Montgomery gave special care to the choice of his staff. Freddie de Guignand, who had proved a most able director of military intelligence, became his chief staff officer and, with a ruthlessness which earned him enemies but which was militarily most desirable, Montgomery threw out several obvious misfits and replaced them with the best talent he found on the spot, or could bring from home.

And so when on August 30th Rommel burst through the minefields deep south around Himeimat and like a not too expert dentist who's not quite sure what he's about, began probing the jaws of our Ruweisat defences, the Eighth Army was no complacent patient. The lion's jaws snapped to and gave the importunate veterinary such a shock that, after three days' fighting, he was forced to loosen his hold and fall back on Himeimat. Rommel called this a "reconnaissance in force," but he employed his whole Afrika Korps on the job and it was, without doubt, a second attempt to break through to the Nile. But instead of engaging his armour, our tanks lay low and fired from dug-down positions, our guns plastered his advance and the R.A.F. caught his tanks several

times while they were refuelling, causing the most appalling destruction.

By the time I got down to the Himeimat battlefield, the terrain looked like a Gruyere cheese. On the rocky ground the fragmentation of our bombs and shells had been remarkable. The slaughter was horrible. Beside the scores of wrecked tanks and trucks lay tins of food, tin hats, water-bottles, but when you picked up these useful things you found them full of splinter holes, and all spoiled. Millions of flies were feasting off this, and other wreckage. There was a smell of death everywhere. Explosions had scattered dead men's belongings far and wide. I picked up a letter from someone's mother in Kaiserslautern which with unconscious irony observed, "We are so glad you have left that awful desert and are now in beautiful Egypt." And another, from a fraulein Grete in Cologne, had pressed flowers in it and asked, "After all this time, do you still love me?"

The owners of both lay, broken and burned, by the side of their 88-millimetre gun.

There was no doubt that we had won a considerable victory. De Guingand got a D.S.O. for his share in its planning and Monty had reason to be pleased with his first handling of Eighth Army. But, wisely, not too much fuss was made about it all.

For the shadow of much greater events was already upon us.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### TWELVE DAYS AT ALAMEIN

PREPARATIONS for the battle of Alamein, well advanced by the end of September, had the finishing touches put to them when on October 1st the newest corps in the army, the Royal Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, began work at the front and in the Delta. The Eighth Army, now amounting to some 100,000 men, against 96,000 on the Axis side, was ready to put into the field three British armoured divisions with Sherman and Grant tanks and a number of British Valentines and Churchills, each mounting the new 6-pounder gun, besides Crusaders, Honeyys, other Valentines and the old infantry tank the "Matilda," mounting the 2-pounder or 37-millimetre weapon. It had quantities of armoured cars including the new "Road Tanks," which carried two-pounder guns of the same size as the tanks; it disposed of 600 guns for use in the initial barrage and the Desert Air Force had 700 bombers for its share of the strafing. Upwards of 120,000 lorries stood by to carry the advance forward.

Eighth Army was a beautifully tempered, mechanised projectile. But it could not have functioned without R.E.M.E. and the enormous industrial undertaking in the rear which this corps operated. Although functioning at the end of a line of communications 12,000 miles long, our base organisation was far superior to the enemy's. Every vehicle and almost every weapon except the tanks reached the Middle East in crates, in order to save shipping space, and R.E.M.E. was able to assemble 8500 vehicles a month in its own plants which employed besides thousand of soldiers, about 30,000 Middle Eastern mechanics and labourers. These ranged from high-skilled refugees from Germany to Basutoland natives. Palestinian and Egyptian girls specialised in making fine parts like electrical components. One factory reconditioned electric batteries at the rate of 7000 each month, another retrod tyres, another rolled things like buckets and mines

out of plates which were shipped flat, again to save space. All the old Bible trades like tinsmiths, carpenters and blacksmiths are excellently done in the Middle East, and native artisans were found to be apt pupils in more complicated engineering processes. Vast quantities of spares had to be stocked because everything wore out so fast in the desert ; each vehicle shipped, for example, required two engines.

R.E.M.E. personnel were distributed right through the Army from the men who went into battle to tow away damaged tanks for repair to those who manned the great field workshops which, set up in tents on the desert, might easily cover four to six square miles when dispersed against air bombing.

During the month following the start of the Alamein battle, R.E.M.E. recovered, repaired and returned to battle over 1000 tanks ; some went through the works more than once.

On Friday, October 23, 1942, Montgomery received the war correspondents in his tent. On his right sat Brigadier de Guignand, on his left Air Vice-Marshal Conyngham. He handed us the Order of the Day which was then being read out to the troops, the order which boldly stated : " The battle which is now about to begin will be one of the decisive battles in history. It will be the turning-point of the war," and added, " together we will hit the enemy for six, right out of North Africa."

These words caused some astonishment at the time, as did the brisk tones in which they were uttered. The speaker seemed to take this very large proposition quite as a matter of course.

" At 10 o'clock to-night," he added, drily, " a battle will begin at Alamein and will be fought out by moonlight. It will be terrific—quite terrific. By dawn to-morrow we shall know how we stand. There's no question of the ultimate issue, merely as to whether it will be comparatively easy or relatively long. But this battle will be won."

Montgomery traced the uphill battle the Eighth Army had had to fight, the loss of between 70,000 and 80,000 casualties after Gazala, the slow recovery.

" Success-failure : success-failure," he continued. " That has been the pattern of the war in the desert and its been very disheartening for the soldiery. They are quite first-class. It's up

to me to see they win success. The soldiery will never let you down—never. Throughout English history the military failures we've had—and they've been many—have been due to two factors : one, faulty command and, two, bad staff work. Hence I feel my responsibility is very great."

Then he touched on a very interesting subject which we could not mention at that time. The battle, he said, would be fought to the bitter end. Generally in this war there had been far too many cases of unwounded men surrendering to the enemy. The Japanese had taught us all a lesson in this respect. They rarely gave in ; nor must we, while breath remained in our bodies.

On coming out of the interview, I asked some troops who had just heard the Order of the Day what they thought of it. They liked its tone. A corporal said, "I like the way he minces no words—no hedging about 'reconnaissance in force' or any of that boloney." And a London private said, "I hope he's right. I've made two return trips to Benghazi and when we get there this time, we've bloody well *got* to stay."

We drove up to Alamein railway station and found a small stone hut near the lakes there, where we parked down, made a bully stew and waited for zero hour. Everywhere, drawn off tracks and the road, were lorries packed with troops awaiting the order to advance. Men were helping each other to buckle on harness. They had an air of alertness which of itself would tell you something was afoot. They tied tin hats tightly under the chin, smoked a final cigarette huddled together in greatcoats against the biting wind. A bizarre note was the New Zealanders' band having a rehearsal grouped around the bandmaster in the moonlight. The brassy victory music sped the troops on their way.

Just before 9.40 p.m. we walked up to the hill above the railway station and precisely at that hour, as though Montgomery had pressed a magic button, as in a sense he did, the whole desert spouted into tongues of flame as the greatest British barrage since the last war sprang into life.

This moment was the climax of two years' fighting in that desert. The biggest battle the African continent had seen since Rome fought Carthage had begun.

Over a front six miles wide between the sea and Ruweisat

ridge a British gun, spaced every 23 yards, opened a fire which was to last for five hours without ceasing then, after a brief lull, continued again until sunrise.

The battle order was : in the north the 9th Australian Division, next to it the 1st South African Division with our Tenth Corps consisting of the mechanised New Zealand Division with tanks and two British armoured divisions some miles in the rear ; then the 4th Indian Division, the 51st Highland Division, the 44th English Division in reserve, the 50th English Division, including Fighting French and Greeks, and the 3rd British Armoured Division ready to mount a diversionary attack upon Himeimat, in the extreme south.

Facing us, from north to south, stood the German 164th Division, the Italian Trieste and the German crack 90th Light, with the 15th German Panzer Division and the Littorio Armoured Division in reserve ; next the Bologna Division with the 21st German Panzers and the Italian Arriete Armoured Divisions behind them, then the Brescia Division, the Folgore and Pavia, with German infantry to stiffen the Italians.

At 9.30 p.m. all was still. A minute later a noise like a fundamentalist's conception of the Crack of Doom burst forth, peal upon peal of martial thunder, a growling and booming and roaring which was going to last all night through. Splendid and horrifying ! No London blitz, not even the biggest fire raid, was anything like this. For weeks the gunners had plotted enemy gun positions, and now they were firing directly upon them. The weight of our fire was prodigious, often obliterating. Next morning prisoners told us of one sector where 80 British guns were firing upon four German guns. No wonder that for the first hour the enemy scarce replied at all, made a feeble response thereafter.

Now it was zero hour—10 p.m.—and our sappers and infantry began to move forward. In some sectors a full 2000 yards separated them from the enemy ; in others, and particularly near the coast, it was only 600 yards. Our most forward troops had been secretly in position from the night before, lying doggo in shallow holes which our working parties had prepared on previous dark nights. The moment our troops moved, the barrage lifted

and began plastering farther back. The artillery programme provided for creeping barrages all night long ; they had to be miracles of precision, or our own men would have been mown down.

The Highlanders were singing "Loch Lomond" as they moved up in trucks ; ordinarily the sound of hundreds of voices would have given the show away but with hundreds of guns singing too, it made no difference. When they debussed, each company had its piper at the head and the whole division advanced in open formation in a series of lines, with the pipe music playing them into battle. They had to cross 3000 yards of No Man's Land with scarcely a single shrub on it—as flat as a billiard table. No cover was possible. So the Scots just did without it and jogged doggedly forward, closing ranks when a man fell. One of the pipe majors died as he played.

It seemed suicide to advance across that barren steppe, which the enemy were sweeping with machine-guns. But the Highlanders massed on, as on parade.

A wounded Scots lieutenant who refused to evacuate himself until much later that night, when I saw him, told me that the Italians who were in the first line resisted strenuously, as well they might, for they had plenty of machine-guns. The Germans were in the second line, and were even better supplied with guns ; they fought toughly but, said the lieutenant, "when we got right up on them, and they saw our steel and our tommy-guns glinting at them, they too came out calling 'Kamerad.'" Some of the Scotties went in hanging on the backs of their own tanks, just like the Soviet infantry have done.

General Wimberley, in command of the Highlanders, had a narrow escape from death when a mortar shell burst near his Jeep and he was thrown out on his head by the explosion. His driver and escort were killed, but the general wound up with his head stuck in the sand like an ostrich, suffering from nothing worse than concussion.

Another young Scots officer told me he captured one truculent Nazi officer, only twenty-one, who complained : "You Highlanders fight in a brutal fashion : we Germans do not wage war savagely."



"That, coming from a Nazi, was about the coolest impudence I had ever heard," he said. "So I just said to him: 'Look here, you bastard, you mayn't like our style of fighting but that's the kind you're going to get from now on until the war's won.' He sobered a bit at that, and the next thing I heard he had begun to weep, exclaiming, 'What will my poor old father think of me when he hears I surrendered!'"

We aimed to make a bridgehead some 16,000 yards wide in our chosen sector in the north: diversionary attacks were being staged in the south and some wonderful 'sound effects' were put on by our deception experts to make the enemy think that there was more than one armoured division down there. The result was that von Thoma thought it advisable to keep half his armour down south, and when the 10th Corps was ready to smash through, it did not meet the full armoured strength of the enemy at first.

Our infantry and sappers made the initial punch. Thousands of mines had to be lifted to enable the infantry to pass through, and most of this work had to be done on the first night. Each infantry division had tanks temporarily under command, apart from the armoured divisions, who were not due to start until 2 a.m. the following morning.

It's midnight. The barrage has now been going two hours and twenty minutes and hasn't let up a single minute. I've come farther up and am in position in front of the batteries firing on the Tel el Eissa sector, where the Australians and South Africans are. The close, rending explosions sound like some giant tearing calico in the sky above me. The shells careen overhead. I feel the blast of their passage strongly and brace myself, legs apart, to take the strain. What it must be to be on the receiving end of this inferno beggars the imagination! The enemy must be well to ground. One would have to be a cross between a hero and a lunatic to expose oneself to this whirlwind.

The gun flashes light up the whole area like day, and put the moon to shame. In the quick glare long lines of tanks and anti-tank guns moving forward are illuminated in a sinister green-blue light. The dew-sodden armoured sides of the tanks glisten like

warships' plates at sea. The faces of the men perched atop look sombre and grand as the characters in a film by some master director. It is a grim and beautiful scene which suggests, inevitably, vengeance and the just punishment of crimes.

Yet every now and then the spell is broken when some cheerful English voice calls from inside the steel shells, "Wotcher, chum!" or "Seasonable weather for the time of year, ain't it?" or some such crack. And Thumbs-up signs are exchanged with those standing beside the track.

The precision of the advance delights one! Here are thousands of men and vehicles moving forward over desert tracks which are riddled with minefields according to a programme which must be absolutely correct, or the whole operation would be endangered. If one tank battalion reached a certain point a few minutes late, the lives of many men might be forfeit. So most of these men pass silently before me concentrating on the job to the exclusion of even a word of banter.

Now and then an enemy shell bursts on the ridge before me. Presumably, it's counter-battery work. But it's mighty feeble. For every fifty shells fired from just behind me, not more than two enemy ones are lobbed back.

01.55 *a.m.*—I have moved over to where the most important operation of all is taking place. Through here our armoured striking force must pass to reach its objectives. Six sand tracks have been made on the desert, labelled "Sun," "Moon," "Top-hat," "Ship," etc. Along each an armoured brigade will pass. Each track is marked with shaded lights at intervals and the surface has been smoothed by giant bulldozers until it is more like an English road than a channel for attack which leads right up to the enemy positions and which is now being continued by the sappers, and marked with tapes, right through the minefields.

Five minutes to go. A Scots police sergeant, impeccable in red cap and white gloves, is on duty, with five helpers. They might be directing cup final crowds instead of seeing to it that tanks reach the right spot on the battlefield at night. The organisation is beautiful! There are 2000 military police on point duty to-night to shepherd the tanks along the right paths.

And at the last moment, water carts drive up the tracks, to lay the dust and ensure smooth going. . . .

Now it's time. Right on the tide, a sound as of a heavy bomber formation swells into my ears. The tanks are coming! Out of the silvery haze of moonlight to the eastward which looks so clean compared with the smoke-blackened atmosphere, stinking of cordite and vitiated by thousands of rounds of shellfire to the westward, a long, curving caterpillar of great tanks looms up. The first monster comes abreast of me, his aero engine whirling as he changes up and shoots thirty tons of solid welded streamlined armour-plating past me as smoothly as a limousine accelerating away from a traffic bloc.

Behind him comes another, another and another. . . . They are Shermans, with the 75 mm. gun which can fire all around the traverse. The policemen wave them past a junction where everything is held up to let them through. Even an ambulance, I note, is halted. It's more important that these tanks get through to time than that one or two wounded men be delayed on their way to hospital—Spartan but essential code of mercy!

A great many components of an armoured division roll by—after the heavies come cruiser tanks made in Britain, anti-tank guns with the crews perched high on the portees wearing against the cold, woollen Balaclavas and mufflers knitted by loved English fingers and cherished against this winter campaign we all knew was coming. Then shock troops in fast trucks with all kinds of automatic weapons, special tanks for emitting smoke screens, 25-pounder guns mounted on tank chassis and some other vehicles too secret to write about. For half an hour the procession goes by. And this is only one tank track. It's the same on all the others. We are on the *qui vive* to see if enemy bombers will try to catch the brigades on the tracks, before they can deploy. But they all get through safely.

Now it's 03.00 *a.m.* I hear the first German prisoner was passed down the line an hour ago and now sits solitary in a cage near the sea. Someone suggests I go and 'interview' him, but I have no heart for it, and anyhow by morning there will be more to choose from.

News comes in from forward. The tanks are not getting

through yet, but they are all now in position. The noise of these hundreds of mastodons approaching, their squeaking and groaning over the blue, must by now be audible in the enemy lines. I can hear it even above the gunfire. It's an eerie and frightening noise. I'd hate to be in a narrow trench and know they were coming for me. I hear the casualties are pretty heavy on both sides, but considering this is a break-through on the scale of the last war, ours are considered reassuring. A German prisoner says that of 60 in his company—a depleted number—16 were captured by us, between 20 and 25 were wounded, and he knows not how many killed. That's the way it's been.

04.00 a.m. Good for the Greeks! They've got in among the Italians down south and taken 20 prisoners—and some of these fellows are just little barbers or waiters from Alexandria. . . . The Fighting French have advanced against Himeimat and the famous 7th Armoured Division have moved up in their support.

Italians and Germans are sandwiched together all down the line. An Italian company will be put next to a German one. Language difficulties must crop up in such proximity, but the guns are still roaring, so maybe they can't hear each other speak and it doesn't matter. It's getting on for 05.00 and still the bombardment goes on. Here, there and everywhere flares are hanging in the sky. Some are ours, indicating to the attackers where to concentrate. Others are German, fired from mortars to illuminate no man's land against our advance. Others are dropped by British aircraft over German objectives and by German aircraft over ours. The blue, green, yellow and white lights make the desert quite beautiful. And all the time the sand is belching forth fire before me and farther back great sickly white flashes show where our biggest guns are firing. I'm pretty worn and am going to turn in. I return to where the camp bed is pitched beside my truck and fall into it, clothes and all. Our *Gottterdammerung* of a barrage goes on still. It seems unlikely I can sleep. But after seven hours of barrage I am acclimatised and sleep well.

07.00. It's dawn again. The guns are still firing, but more brokenly now. You can pick out the sharper drumming of tank fire and anti-tank guns. Here come the first clouds of British

bombers and fighter-bombers. Then come American mediums flown by the U.S. Air Corps. Who would have dreamt when we began our offensive last year that we'd have them with us to-day?

Struggling out of bed, I see columns of men marching in slovenly fashion down the hill. How fortunate I am bedded down next to a P.O.W. cage! At 08.00 we go over to talk to the prisoners. Our early-rising commander-in-chief, Alexander, has already been to see them. Already there are several hundreds, about half German, half Italian. A young officer from Peipsic asks me how far I think our push will go and when I say "All the way," he answers, "That think I also."

09.00. Our air arm is striking hard now. Our troops who occupied exposed positions during the darkness need air support urgently. They are getting it. A critical day lies ahead. We have to try to hold on to what we have won.

On Saturday night, at the close of the first full day's fighting, we were holding fast to all our gains. We had then won a bridge-head some 16,000 yards wide and advanced upon an average 8000 yards. At the north we penetrated through two defensive lines, but it was more of a break-in than a break-through, because there were a lot of strong points, and more mines, behind these. The process of muscling-in on the enemy positions had to be gradual. So far, enemy reaction had been rather cautious; it began to look as though this was to tempt us to stick our neck out.

We slept in a stone hut that night but were driven out repeatedly by nuisance raiders, who swept over the sand machine-gunning, making us jump into slit-trenches. They set an ammunition truck on fire near us and this sputtered and popped off for the rest of the night, making sleep impossible.

On the Sunday the sand was blowing hard. The Axis launched several counter-attacks with tanks under cover of the "Khamsin" but made no progress. That afternoon I crouched in a 25-pounder's gun-pit and with my ears stopped against the blast, watched the gunners breaking up a concentration of German tanks, which was forming up to attack the Australians' new-won positions.

This particular gun had fired no fewer than 563 rounds during five and a half hours of barrage on the opening night, but that

afternoon the battery of which it was a unit had only to fire some ten minutes before the report came through on the field telephone: "Okay, lay off. The tanks are dispersing."

Coming down from the line to write despatches in the evening we ran into a perfect treasure—the abandoned, underground headquarters of the Australian Division! It was in lovely condition, deep dug, with asbestos walls, electric light and even a telephone not far off. We moved in at once. One dugout to sleep and eat in, one to cook in. Never had I experienced such luxury in the desert before! And the black-out gave us a tremendous advantage. We were able to write our despatches at night, whereas every one else, for lack of blacked-out lights, had to cease writing and go to bed when darkness fell.

That night enemy aircraft strafed up and down the road persistently, but we slept, snugly secure, ten feet below the sand.

On Monday, October 26, we went up to the Highland Division who had again pushed ahead during the night. On the way we went into dressing-station 86 of the Eleventh Australian Field Ambulance. Three German bombs—one a delayed action—had fallen squarely upon it. Part of it was underground, which saved some lives, but all work had to be stopped for some hours while the damage was being cleared. Two of the doctors were so generous as to suggest that, from their experience in Tobruk, they felt the Germans usually respected the Red Cross and that this must have been an error. But that was hard to believe. The white tents of the hospital were brilliant in the moonlight; and there was the usual huge red cross on the ground.

The place was now filled with wounded from the night's fighting. I could not stand more than a few minutes in there. In one cubbyhole a doctor was amputating an arm; in another, still grey and stinking from the effects of the bomb, ten men lay gasping on trestle tables, having fresh blood pumped into them from a blood bank. Men with faces like soiled cardboard were slopped on a bench up against a wall, waiting their turn for smaller operations. The floor was full of badly wounded. You had to have a care where you walked. The doctors worked like . . . like what? . . . well, if you must have it, like overworked butchers on a Saturday night.

This, I thought, is the stuff no paper will ever print nor will any photographer record it. And yet it is the core of the whole battle. This is what all the expensive death machinery is designed to do, to kill as many of the enemy as possible, in the shortest time ; to fill the enemy's hospitals with wrecks, just as their guns and tanks have filled this one with ours. But I felt I would rather see the *successful* results of these labours. Dead men don't look too bad. But wounded men, and especially those who no longer wish to live but who are kindly but firmly being kept alive willy nilly, are no sight for the quick and the sanguine.

The big barrage had been grand and exciting. But this, its aftermath, was like bad meat in the mouth.

This is the last war over again. It's *Journey's End*. It's *Undertones of War*. The Argylls are just coming out of the line. A blanket of oily black smoke hangs over the ridge in front of us where British aircraft have just dropped scores of bombs upon the German front line. Choking clouds of sand are rolling over the intervening patch of dunes and scrub. Threading their way between the minefields a line of Jocks coming back for a rest stand out in black relief against the billowing vapour and dirt. Axis shells burst lazily and haphazardly over the plain. The smell of powder mingles with the peculiar odour of the sandstorm which is of the order that might be caused by 70 maids with 70 mops getting into a very dirty room and sweeping it all up into your nostrils.

A hundred feet up the sky is comparatively clear and our ack-ack is opening up against enemy fighters who are trying to chase our bombers on their way home. Never before in the desert have we had such a multitude of ack-ack. All the batteries which once had to be spaced out all the way from Alexandria to Benghazi are now in this small area. So you rarely see the Stukas over now. In addition, every man on the ground seems to join in our barrage. It's no exaggeration to say that there's more danger from our own falling shrapnel than from anything the enemy can do. We dived for shelter just now not from the enemy, but from our own shell-caps which came hurtling down with a spitting, hissing sound that put the fear of our own potency into us.

The Argylls come nearer. Above the noise of the air battle and the falling shells comes the music of the pipes. Each platoon comes out in single file, with its own piper at the head playing them to rest as they played them into battle. It's so theatrical yet moving a scene one has difficulty in believing it's all true.

The men stumble along, dog-tired, tin hats over their eyes, flesh wounds bound up with temporary bandages, faces bright yellow with sand. Each section is piloted to a line of slit-trenches ready made to receive it and they fall out, every man opposite his own hole, dump their equipment and just fall into it. Field kitchens prepare a hot dish and tea for them. I get talking to a company commander, a red-haired major from Sutherlandshire. He said they had been in the line for 48 hours, trying to silence some 88mm. guns so that the tanks could go through. It wasn't easy because each gun had snipers posted about it to pick off any one approaching; then they had the unpleasant habit of firing a shell from a low angle so that it would skid along the ground like a great ball at cricket. Finally, they got one of these guns and dug themselves into the desert a bit beyond it.

"Their machine-gun fire was very heavy," said the major, "and it was a relief when night came. The Germans put in a counter-attack. We let them come on until their figures were black against the horizon: then we gave them all we had. At that moment they began shouting and yelling. Some of it was orders: the rest queer war-cries and mere gibberish. I suppose they'd been told Highlanders were barbarous people who whoop it up like Red Indians. And this was a bit of our own medicine for us. However, we weren't frightened and we drove them off. They left a lot of dead behind.

"We spent all Sunday out there doggo, even getting a bit of sleep, and so did they. You can't show your head out there by day but fortunately the dust began to blow this afternoon and we were able to get back here for a rest, unobserved."

For the next three nights the infantry pushed forward, nibbling off another sector here, another few pillboxes there, until the initial breach became a sizable bulge. Each morning, we had to pause to digest the gains before being ready to move again. The



process was expensive. There seemed no end to the German defences in depth and though those who saw him reported Montgomery as confident as ever, there were not wanting voices in the army—and important ones—who vouchsafed discreetly that this process could not go on indefinitely. We were still far from making a clean break-through and, until we did this, our superior strength in armour could not be deployed. We did not know then that our total casualties at Alamein would prove to be 13,000. Most people at that stage, I think, thought we must have expended at least 20,000, if not more, in dead, wounded and missing. We did not make enough allowance for the power of the barrage, which sometimes caused whole trenchfuls of the enemy to stumble up dazed at the feet of our infantrymen and give themselves up without fighting.

I noted myself at the time that I thought we would bring it off, but that if a break-through were not achieved within the next week, the whole battle would surely have to be called off on account of its costliness. And not only in lives : the guns could not go on firing 500 rounds a night for long.

Some of my colleagues became quite despondent. Christopher Buckley, at the daily conferences which were held by an Intelligence officer down by the sea, used to sweep his arms through the air and cry : " Can *any one* give me the tactical answer ? " and Richard McMillan too felt gloomy enough to say that these nightly ' nibblings ' were becoming too expensive to be continued.

Christopher's phrase became quite a catch-word among people at 30 Corps.

The film *Desert Victory*, despite its technical excellence, certainly gives a false impression of the battle as a whole by making it seem *far too easy*. Alamein never was easy. And about the end of its first week it seemed to many people on the spot that our effort had run into serious difficulties ; that although the Germans were losing ground every night, we were not winning the battle.

On October 31 I followed up the advance which the Australians made on the coast overnight towards Sidi Abd El Rahman. I sat in the frontline there and made these notes :

"Through binoculars I can see the white minaret of the mosque at Sidi Rahman. Two thousand yards ahead a German strongpoint called Barnes' Post is still holding out. About the same distance away to the right, near where the glistening white sandhills give way to the cobalt blue of the Mediterranean, another and larger enemy position is being shelled: that is 'Clover Leaf,' and in it, and in a third position adjoining called 'Leg of Mutton,' considerable numbers of Panzer Grenadiers are dug in. One wouldn't care to be in their place. Our guns are firing at extraordinarily close range; one can see the shells bursting plumb in those positions. The gunners are firing from fifty yards behind me and I am lying on my stomach as much to get down and away from the channels of blast which are issuing from their smoking muzzles as to keep my head down from occasional enemy bullets which zip across the plain and go dead in the sandbags in front of me. Those strongpoints will soon be surrounded. Already shells are striking them from the south as well as from the east and our infantry are creeping forward from both these directions. Someone is emitting a smoke screen—one can't be sure who. Maybe it's the enemy, to prevent our gunners spotting or to screen a withdrawal; maybe it's our own infantry coming from the south, to cover open ground which they will have to traverse to get into Barnes' Post.

"You can see enemy vehicles moving about on the skyline and three of their trucks, knocked out nearer to. I walked up here from Battalion H.Q. Our field guns were placed both behind and in front of it, firing over open sights from so low an elevation that one felt decidedly awkward driving in front of them in a car. The shells which screamed over were so low it was hard to believe they were not within stretching distance. One had to dodge behind knolls to get the car up without putting it under observation, for if there's one thing soldiers don't like it's brasshats, or even war correspondents who drive up by car or stroll about the skyline on their flat feet, making themselves conspicuous and drawing enemy fire. After all, I don't have to be here and can always go away, but the Digger who has been living in the front-line for a week is simply 'not amused' to receive a packet of flamboyant visitors. So I trot along with what must look like

exaggerated caution and am stopped at the entrance to a minefield and told to follow the piece of tape which marks a safe path across it, up to the forward positions. 'You'll be okay, chum,' I am told. 'You can't fail to see the mines sticking up through the sand on either side.'

"I step forward delicately, as though I had the month's ration of 'shell eggs' under foot, and get to where the crew of a mortar are sorting out ammunition, preparing for a shoot. Men stripped to the waist and with handkerchiefs tied round their heads against the sun are sitting about smoking and watching the results of our artillery fire. The enemy don't seem to have any fieldpieces in there. Every now and then a shell comes over from him, but you can't see the flashes—they must be very far back. They are having to sit and take it in there at short range, while their guns give only spasmodic support farther back.

"The brigadier in charge of this sector was in good spirits when I met him on my way up. He took me down to the beach and showed me where the enemy-held coastline swung out in a bay which would have given them valuable observation over our positions were it not for a spit of sand all along which shields our men from the sea. You could see enemy movements along the coast, but there was as yet no sign of withdrawal. Some of our men were swimming in the sea. It was as though they were on the beach at Black Rock whilst along at Hove the Germans disported themselves on *their* piece of sand.

"While I sat up here the great news came that Thompson's Post had fallen. This must mean the beginning of the end for the Germans on the coast. Then, only half an hour later, we hear that the poor old brigadier, who had been so jaunty and healthy just now, had received a direct hit on his dugout. They dug him out from the mess. He was taken away mortally wounded."

Any picture of Alamein must inevitably be fragmentary. No one—not even Montgomery—at any time had a bird's eye view of the battle. All one could do was to retain impressions piecemeal, one sector at a time, as one ran up and down the ever-widening 'bulge' and from flank to flank inside it. But I did see the final break-through by the New Zealanders which paved the way for

the passing-through of the armour and the battle of Tel el Aqqaqir at which the Panzer Armée Afrika was finally defeated.

It was at noon on November 1st that we learned that another big attack was going in that night, preceded by the second greatest barrage of the campaign and assisted by 600 tanks. Actually, this barrage proved to be the most concentrated of all, for the front was much smaller than on the opening night.

I reached a position in front of the guns on the New Zealand sector about 8 o'clock, dispersed the vehicle as wide as possible and began at once to dig a slit trench. Every man had to have his trench up there. The larger vehicles had holes dug for them with mechanical diggers. The ground was stony and it took me three hours to scratch a hole deep enough to get my head and legs below surface. And still my posterior stuck up in an undignified manner. But it was intensely cold and one was glad of the exercise. For some reason I felt more frightened that night than on any other in the desert. The night seemed to wear an evil aspect. You knew that all the men around you were about to hurl themselves into the final breach. So much hung upon the result. It was entirely possible that many of the tanks would be destroyed, that the bulk of this division would never get through; the enemy knew very well what was coming and must have massed all his guns at the issue from the bridgehead.

Promptly at 01.05 a.m. the guns burst forth again. They were to fire for four hours without ceasing. Their pits were behind and all around me. The noise made conversation impossible unless one shouted into a soldier's ear, as into an old lady's ear-trumpet. The blinding flashes and blast that made one sway on one's feet also gave one an infernal headache after the first hour. Stripped to the waist in their pits despite the cold, the gunners slaved away. There was scarcely any counter-battery work. We seemed to have them at our mercy. Near me two gunners swayed about high up in an observation tower, although only in the lightning-like moments when the guns spoke could they have seen anything. Enemy aircraft came over trying to bomb the area whence came the gun flashes, but this was a forlorn task when scores of flashes were seen at one moment over a scattered field. So they just dropped their loads wildly. We heard a stick crumping down

apparently coming nearer. I was standing beside a tank at the time so I just dived underneath it and the bombs fell wide.

When daylight came a further breach had been made, 4000 yards wide. We saw General Freyberg, V.C., riding round on a tour of inspection in his Honey tank. He looked jubilant and told us this was the final breach he had been praying for. Now the 10th Corps could really get cracking and decide the battle, once and for all. Several hundred tanks had already got through, he said, and a tremendous battle between them and the German tanks, plus many 88 mm. guns, was about to begin in the region of Tel el Aqqaqir. So we decided to press on into the breach, trying to get as near to this as possible, though without much expectation of seeing any of it.

Before moving up, we dashed back a bit to Corps H.Q. to get an overall picture. Here, whilst a staff officer was giving us details of what had occurred, a German fighter was shot down right over our heads and the pilot baled out, taking ten minutes to float down from a great height. While the officer droned on . . . "position satisfactory . . . so many prisoners here, so many tanks out there . . ." I could not resist turning round and keeping one eye on the falling airman. Obviously, he was going to fall quite close to where we stood. Yet I noticed that every correspondent was resisting the natural impulse to run over and interview him when he touched earth! The reason for this unprofessional behaviour was that we had only a few minutes to write a despatch with the glorious news in : a despatch rider stood waiting. As soon as the officer finished speaking, we all rushed away to get the glad tidings off. And the Luftwaffe man, ignored by the Press of the world, was rounded up by a couple of Australian cooks, armed with butcher's knives !

Now came the *clou* of ten days' fighting. We rushed back into the breach in time to see the tanks of the 7th Armoured Division come panting up from the south to join the other two armoured divisions in the big tank battle. Strange to say, the 7th did not seem to know what had happened. I spoke to a major in a General Grant tank, the front of which was loaded with sandbags to help deflect shells from the frontal armour, and he said, "Is everything going all right ? "

"Couldn't be better," I replied, "the whole line has been broken."

Looking relieved, he added, "We were so out of touch down south, and browned off with doing nothing, that when we were ordered north we thought it must be to defend Alexandria; we thought Rommel must have broken through."

So *this* is Tel el Aqqaqir . . . for the first time it's mobile tank warfare again, in open country. We suffered heavy losses in breaking through. To get clean out our tanks had to break through a last chain of anti-tank guns and this was not done without great expense of life and vehicles. But now the terrible, decisive struggle is joined. It is being fought with the utmost ruthlessness on both sides. Think of the stakes involved! Think what the prospect of retreat now must mean to the Axis soldiery who each day for 120 days have been bolstered up with promises that soon their long sit-down within grabbing distance of the coveted prize would be over, that soon they would be in Alexandria! For one thing, the enemy hasn't enough transport to get all his army away in a hurry. If he fails in this battle, thousands of Italians in the south will be cut off and finished . . .

Great clouds of smoke and sand hang over the battlefield. They are visible for miles, as one comes up. There is more sand than smoke because every tank that moves kicks up such a quantity of it, there is really no need for smokescreens. The pall of sand out there resembles the worst kind of "Khamsein" which old desert rats have ever experienced. Only a reporter equipped with some kind of infra-red ray machine could possibly pierce this blanket of sand and recount what is really happening. Yet this fog is merciful. It gives cover to helpless men forced to do what tank crews most dread—bale out of their vehicles and try to get out of the battle on foot. Whenever a tank is hit, a sheet of flame can be distinguished, piercing the encircling gloom. Then there's a dull red glow like a brazier at which chestnuts are being roasted as the tank blazes up, and sharp explosions as its remaining ammunition goes off.

It is really a disgusting spectacle . . . Men who can get clear jump out and run for it . . . run away from the glowing fire, out

of the circle of light it casts and into the welcome gloom of smoke and sand clouds . . . away before the machine-guns, which tanks use to mow down men who leave their armoured shells, can be brought to bear. The noise of firing never lets up for a second. Firing from a thousand yards or less, the explosions come sharp and cracking, quite different from field-guns, though their calibre may be the same. Men on the fringe of the battle area which shifts uneasily up and down as the heavy tanks with surprising slowness move towards different points of vantage, receive the 'overs' and keep ducking flat as they hear the hissing approach of tank ammo. that has missed its mark. Mostly armour-piercing solid shot, at least it doesn't explode and so is vastly preferable to field-gun stuff. To the men inside the tanks the appalling hullabaloo which we hear is hardly audible. Their earphones shut out the noise and the roar of their engines and the fire of their own big guns drown all. That's why baling out is such a shock. From this noise-free immolation one is suddenly projected into the full roaring fury of the battle. The first instinct is to shelter under or behind one's own tank. But if that is burning, one has to run for it.

Some crews whose tanks have gone are brought out of the battle hanging upon the outside of tanks which come out damaged, under their own steam. But you can't get much of a picture of what's going on out of any of them. Most are dazed ; some talk in whispers. One man, his face bright yellow with sand, clothes filthy with oil and sweat and a yellow and crimson bandage tied around his wounded cheek, finds my curiosity somewhat ridiculous, as well he might. Then he jabs an admonitory finger against my chest and says, "Wot you want to go in there for ? You can't see nothing nohow. Take my advice. You stay out of it."

An ambulance man comes up and leads him away but, as he goes, he turns again and repeats, "Just you stay out of it !"

Never more willingly have I taken any good man's advice.

On the following day there was a great withdrawal of enemy transport along the road between Sidi Rahman and Daba, and on the Barrel track over the desert from Qaret el Abd towards Fuka. All our air force, plus the American squadrons, was turned

loose on these roads and bombed them from dawn until dusk, then started the good work again by the light of flares.

On November 4th I was outside the breach with the 1st Armoured Division when we heard that General von Thoma, who held the same position *vis-a-vis* Rommel as Montgomery towards Alexander, had been captured. To my fury and exasperation—through the delay of a burst tyre—I just missed seeing him being brought in. When we got up with the men who had caught him, the German-born British Intelligence officer who had interrogated him, Kurt Gottlieb, told us all he knew. And a wonderful story it made. Yet this soon became just an incident in a far more absorbing and dramatic pattern. For that afternoon we were told that Montgomery wanted to see all the correspondents at dawn next morning, November 5th. We knew he had an important announcement to make. And we could guess what it would be.

When we got to the place where Monty's caravan was pitched we knew we were going to witness something that could come to most of us but once in a lifetime—the spectacle of a general writing his own chapter of history as he went along, announcing his own victory to the world in his own way, without waiting for an official announcement from Number Ten, or a formal appearance, interspersed with 'Cheers' and well-bred 'hear hears' in the House of Commons.

Monty was about to do something which Wellington had never been able to do. To *his* field of Waterloo he had summoned a score of war correspondents and a battery of camera men. He stood on the steps of his caravan as we came up. The sun was just rising over the sea, dispersing a mist from the waters: sea and sand blended into one opaline line of colours.

Monty walked down the steps, down to a spit of sand. He turned and faced us, motioning us to make a half-circle round him. Obviously, he was enjoying himself hugely. As who would not? We gathered into position, drew out notebooks. Monty threw back his head, placed arms akimbo, cleared his throat.

Now it was coming. But stay . . . a Public Relations officer approached him. The cameramen pointed out that the light was wrong for pictures—the sun was right behind him. The lapping



waves, too, made it difficult to hear. So Monty very obligingly changed the *venue*. He paced lightly back into the shelter of his caravan. Now the light was right. He motioned us to be seated on a neighbouring bank. Was everyone comfortable? All right, he would begin.

"It is complete and absolute victory," said Monty. "The Boche is beaten. The night before last we drove in two hard wedges, then we passed our armour through them and our tanks are now operating in the enemy's rear. Those units of the enemy's which can get away are in full retreat. It is the victory I had hoped for yet hardly thought would come so soon—after just twelve days."

Then he used his favourite verbal trick of repetition: "Yes, after just twelve days . . . The enemy is completely smashed."

"As some of you may know," added Monty, "I captured General von Thoma. I had him in here last night . . ." he indicated the caravan.

"Over dinner we fought our battles over again, here on my oilskin tablecloth we drew our plans in pencil. It was intensely interesting. Not every commander gets a chance to fight a battle twice over with his opponent. Thoma has been fighting steadily for six years. He commanded the German tanks in the Spanish Civil War and he frankly told me Germany had used that war as a testing-ground for this one. He told me he was at Louvain in the Flanders campaign. So was I, but naturally not at the same time. . . ."

And Monty smiled his rather foxy smile, the smile which seems to say: "I'm throwing this out to amuse you but as for me, I am already thinking of something else. . . ."

Thoma was also at Dunkirk, Monty said, and there he had picked up a character appreciation of himself (Monty) in which he was described as a very hard man, ruthless in carrying through his plans—an appreciation which Thoma said he had found to be accurate. Thoma would say nothing about his chief, Rommel. So Monty vouchsafed, "He must be a very good general because he has made the Italians fight."

Then Monty praised the work of his "soldiery"—the gunners and sappers and especially the foot-sloggers—"the man on the

ground is simply indispensable : he has come back into his own now, as some of us always thought he would."

While he had been speaking, and even in passages which sounded pretty grandiloquent as he said them (they sound much more so when you write them down) Monty seemed to have only half his mind on his own discourse. His eye had an abstract gloss on it. One supposed he was busy thinking of the next move ; whether those tanks out behind the enemy might cut them off, whether Rommel himself might fall into his hands. . . .

The sun rose, imparting a little warmth to the scene. The cameras clicked. Our pencils scuttered over the notebooks. Monty was explaining why he wore a tank beret with a Tank Corps badge on it as well as his general's insignia : he travelled a lot in a tank and it was convenient.

The swift, heroic tempo with which the occasion had started now began to slacken. Presently, one felt with a feeling of distress and no little embarrassment, it would relapse altogether into needless explanations, pedestrian question and answer. But Monty rose, as ever, to meet this new threat almost before it took shape.

" Well, gentlemen," said he, " if you will now excuse me, I will be getting back to the battle."

And at that moment, sixty miles to the west of us, our tanks were engaging the enemy rearguard at Fuka and in the south they were beginning the enormous roundup of Italians.

It had been a pretty theatrical half-hour that day on the beach before breakfast : November 5th, 1942. But then it had been a pretty theatrical victory : 75,000 Axis casualties, 500 tanks destroyed and over 1000 guns.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### IN FULL CRY AFTER ROMMEL

IT MADE a wild Guy Fawkes night. Rommel was running at so brisk a pace that our pursuit was becoming a steeplechase. All night long our boys were sending up Verey lights to mark this glorious Fifth of November. All night long the pursuit went on. At dusk on November 5th we were in Daba, and going hard. The tanks out in front kept on wirelessly in : "What in thunder shall we do with all these prisoners?"

The enemy were surrendering to the tanks in groups of 50 and 100 at a time. The crews paused only long enough to point out the way towards Alexandria, then pushed on.

Every one was picking up souvenirs—swastika flags fluttered from the tailboards of trucks and Jerry tin-hats were two a penny on Anglo-Saxon heads.

However hard the road might be ahead, nothing could detract from the sweetness of these first glorious hours of hunting the Hun. The tingling thrill of the first break-through was what thousands of men had been waiting for ever since we lost Tobruk.

Unseasonable rains held up our tanks at Fuka—or rather they prevented the supply trucks from reaching the armour—and this period of 24 hours' grace enabled the German rearguard to escape from encirclement and get away to Mersah Matruh, where they staged another delaying action. Thus was shown once again how much of a misnomer is the phrase "armoured division": the tanks are armoured and can go anywhere in any weather, but the essential supply trucks are wheeled and cannot pass through bad territory. The only solution would be to have every component of such a division a tracked vehicle; but could any nation stand so vast an increase of expense?

I got into Mersah as soon as resistance was broken, and here we found abandoned in German dumps enough underclothing

and brand-new boots to cloth hundreds of men, in addition to enormous quantities of British bully-beef (captured at Tobruk ?), crate upon crate of Chianti and French wines ; 12-pound Danish hams supplied by the Copenhagen firm of " P. and S. Plum," but packed in such thin tins that many had broken and the ham gone bad (Danish sabotage, perhaps, or German shortage of tin ?) ; tons of tinned fruit and vegetables and great quantities of German black bread beautifully packed in cellophane so as to last six months.

We stocked up our truck and left Matruh the richer for a crate of Chianti, half a dozen hams and enough underclothing to last us for a further year's campaigning. By the roadside we found a lorry full of unused German rifles and ammunition and again we helped ourselves, until we were as heavily armed as a gang of Caribbean pirates.

At dawn it was a wonderful sight to see the British campfires flickering over the sodden plain so recently held by the enemy. It reminded one of some old lithograph of bivouacs in the Crimean War . . .

The enemy is trying to hold us again near Sidi Barrani, as he did at Matruh. At noon on November 9th traffic along the coast road was stopped. As I came up some 25-pounders were being hauled off the road and unlimbered, ready to shoot at the enemy's road block. I had passed the 4th Hussars, Winston Churchill's old regiment, who had been fighting down south and got in among their tanks, which were just setting forth to engage. Parking my car off the road beyond the sand dunes, so as not to make a target along the flat, bush-covered plain, I climbed on to some sandhills a little inland from which I had a view over the battlefield.

Enemy shells began to come over with the inimitable high velocity whine of the 88-millimetre and burst with the inimitable ear-aching sharp crack and the thick jet of black smoke. Some were air bursts designed to wound our men in the open vehicles working around to the flank across that flat plain—a wicked burst 30 to 50 feet high against which slit trenches are no protection and tinbats no good. They say it's the 90th Light in there, with

two 105-millimetre guns as well as several eighty-eights and that they are the self-same rascals who held out in Matruh.

It's a bit eerie up here. There's no sound save the occasional crack of a shell and the distant rumbling of our tanks as they fan out over the plain. In the stillness of this beautiful afternoon in sight of the sea and with desert wild flowers blooming after the rain, you can hear the lark trilling as he soars up over the battlefield. As I walk along the rim of the battle, the country becomes more heathlike. It's very like Bagshot, or the sandy commons around Aldershot. As has been said so often before in this war, and always with truth, "the whole scene seems so unreal." Here we are driving Rommel out of Egypt through country fantastically like Hampshire to look at, with the Americans now cracking at him from the other side of Africa, and yet these Nazi gunners are prepared to throw their lives away in a hopeless cause.

Now before me a brave picture forms. Our tanks are spread out in battle formation and are sweeping across the plain. Just like you used to see them in the Aldershot Tattoo—it looks too well ordered to be the real thing. They are running a stiff gauntlet. The enemy drop quick bursts all over the plain; spouts of ink-black explosions shoot into the sky. You see the burst several seconds before you hear the sound of the fire, then quick after it comes the rending noise of the explosion. Now behind me our infantry are coming up in lorries, tinhats jammed on one side, tommy-guns in their hands, ready to go in there after the tanks.

One of our tanks is coming back. It falters, then halts. Men run up from the road. Something is lifted out and a knot of people form beside it.

By the time I get down there, a dying lieutenant is lying beside his tank. The M.O. leans over him, but shakes his head. The lieutenant is very young. Not more than twenty-two. His face is the colour of the white sand he's lying on. But he doesn't look unhappy. He's shot full of morphia and feels no pain.

One of his own crew goes to fetch a padre. The two others are already beginning to dig the young man's grave. Heartless? No, far from that. A tank man asks no fairer than that he should

arrange a comrade's grave and see to it that the inscription on the headstone is right.

The gravediggers, I find, are talking quietly about the way the battle is going now that the Americans are appearing in Rommel's rear.

"I suppose they'll get to Tripoli before us," one of them says. "They've not got the opposition we've got—and *had* for two years. But one thing we'll make sure off. We'll see they get a Dunkirk of their own. . . ."

I heard this sentiment in the mouths of many Eighth Army men as they advanced towards Sollum and the frontier. They're glad the Americans are in. They look forward to shaking hands with them—somewhere in Tripolitania, perhaps, but they have this special English score to settle with the Germans which no one else can do so well—the score of Dunkirk. And they are a bit worried lest over-zealous friends should settle this account before they can get there.

However, scores are really being settled every mile along our road. Two hundred Germans have just been rounded up down the road and here they come . . . never have I seen Nazis spread so thick before. The whole 200 of them are packed into two big lorries, one hundred in each. Their faces are sour and glum. They look dead beat. There are still odd numbers of the enemy in hiding near the sea and in holes in the ground inland. Stray Germans and Italians pop up every now and then to give themselves up.

This leads me into some embarrassment when camping down near the sea that night, after the last 88-millimetre had ceased to fire and the goth Light had folded their tents and crept away. As darkness fell, two soldiers approached me across the scrub. They trained glasses on me and drew close to confer together. Then they came nearer. Plainly, I was being stalked. I had no idea who they were. Probably they were our own side, but one could not be sure. They might be enemy looking for someone to surrender to, or enemy looking for a truck in which to escape. But there was nothing I could do but sit there and see what happened when they came close. Cautiously, the stalkers drew near. It was a relief to see they were British. Recognising me

about the same moment, one of them cried, " We thought you were Iti and were creeping up on you to pinch that truck of yours ! " And another, " We were going to put you in the bag ! "

" Well," I said, " if you still have your doubts. I will sing ' Knocked 'Im in the Old Kent Road ' for you in a convincing accent."

Now it's first light and we must push on. Already long caterpillars of lorried infantry and tanks are creeping over the horizon. The tanks are especially awe-inspiring, swaying and creaking on their huge transporters. The crews seated atop are as high as passengers on a London omnibus. We can see Hellfire, and the escarpment where Libya begins.

The battle of Egypt is won. The third, and last, campaign for Libya is beginning.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### OPERA COMIQUE AT DERNA

*November 15th, 1942*

TO-DAY we are nearing Derna and there is every indication that Rommel's retreat will not halt until it gets right back to El Agheila. Thus, the strategy of our general staff is moving with striking symmetry, according to plan. On September 23rd I wrote a despatch which began : "Rommel is improving and strengthening the fortifications of El Agheila. More than 800 miles behind the Alamein positions, Rommel's engineers have been working on the minefields, tank traps and trenches which held us up last January long enough to enable him to mount his counter-offensive." My paper's headline was : "Rommel prepares for Eighth Army Attack," which, as we know, began precisely one month later.

What Rommel had not calculated upon was Eisenhower's men landing in his rear. However, now that Rommel has abandoned Tobruk he certainly cannot hope to hold Benghazi, which no army in all these African campaigns has ever attempted to defend ; and so, if he is going to make a fight for it, the obvious place is Agheila, a line scarcely less formidable than the Rommel line at Alamein. Yesterday enemy motor transport was seen leaving Benghazi on the road towards Agedabia, and the two roads through the verdant green hills between Derna and Benghazi were jammed with traffic.

Of their original fighting army of roughly 96,000 men the Axis commanders have lost in killed, wounded and prisoners somewhat more than half. However, they still have men enough to man that Agheila line and reinforcements in tanks and guns, though probably not many in view of the American threat in their rear, may have reached Agheila from Tripoli by now. Another factor is the Tripoli garrison itself. This is believed to



possess a fair number of guns which will be useful in trying to stem the advance of General Eisenhower's army from Tunisia. So to-day although we are in a fair way to securing the only part of Cyrenaica that matters—the Jebel Akdar, or green hills—the campaign is far from over.

Rommel has had the devil's own luck in getting as many men away as he has managed to do, and may be inclined to stretch his luck again by engaging the Eighth Army on the Gulf of Sirte whilst the Tripolitarians try to halt Eisenhower. Admittedly, a desperate throw, but then Rommel is in a desperate position and short of surrender, little else seems open to him. His luck consisted in rainfall around October seventh which prevented British tanks which were outflanking him in the desert from reaching the sea and cutting him off. The tanks themselves were not bogged but their supply vehicles got stuck, enabling much of Rommel's retreating force to get away along the coast road. Rommel would probably like us now to come tearing after him and try to break the Agheila line without pausing for breath, but General Montgomery, who has proved himself as wily as Rommel every time, does not move anywhere until he is good and ready to go there. This time there are going to be no cases of British armour immobilised through lack of petrol or supplies.

Where is Rommel himself at this critical juncture? He was seen a few days ago in positions east of Tobruk. An escaped British prisoner, a tank officer, told me he saw Rommel several times during twenty-four hours. He seemed to have given up being the tough desert general and assumed the role of field marshal *in excelsis*. This officer saw Rommel driving in a staff car in full field uniform with all his decorations and a gorgeous splash of red on his breast. He was standing in the open car acknowledging salutes, very much the man of destiny. Many Germans this officer spoke to still professed blind faith in "our two Fuehrers, Hitler and Rommel," but at least one officer of the old school somewhat snobbishly decried Rommel as an upstart, exclaiming, "He behaves like a Junker—he whose father was a policeman!"

But if Rommel has got a good many men away he has certainly had to leave a large booty behind. In Tobruk we found great

quantities of fresh meat labelled "produced in French North Africa." There was enough in the refrigerators near the harbour for every British Tommy, the first night in Tobruk, to have twelve ounces of fresh meat. Tobruk also yielded a great quantity of ammunition. Tinned food was there in plenty and clothing of all kinds, even some for the German nurses who had been in a Tobruk hospital.

All along the road one saw Bedouin, with strings of camels and donkeys, looting abandoned enemy equipment, especially food. If the retreating enemy were on short rations, one can imagine how the unfortunate natives fared.

Several Arabs came up to us asking for bread, which we offered, but they would not take the German variety, saying the evil eye had been cast upon it. We gave them some tinned fish and they went off delighted, giving point to the current Tommy jingle in dog Arabic—"MUNGAREAR QUAIS, QETEAR, TOMMY COMES BUT ONCE A YEAR." Which being interpreted means "the eats are pretty good just now. How unfortunate that the English invasion comes only once a year!"

*November 16th, 1942*

Derna was occupied to-day by three war correspondents accompanied by a Public Relations officer of the Eighth Army. It was a return to the pure comic opera which characterised the taking of some of the Italian garrisons in the first Wavell campaign. It had its serious side in that we found 33 British wounded left behind in the Italian hospital, but let's take the light relief first.

With Edwin Tetlow, Edward Howe and Roy Oliver I arrived on the rainswept escarpment above Derna which so strangely resembles the moors of Derbyshire, at noon. Below us, almost obscured by low clouds over the sea, lay the pretty white town nestling in its palms and clearly outlined was former Marshal Graziani's villa on the sea front wherein I spent a sybaritic twenty-four hours during the last push towards Benghazi nearly a year ago.

On top of the cliff we encountered our old friends the armoured cars of the Lancers. The road down into the town had

a hole sixty feet wide blown in it by the retreating enemy, and it was impossible for any vehicle to get down ; the mountainous road leading out of town westward was also blown up. The armoured cars, having more important things to do elsewhere, were ordered by radio to patrol to the south-west and, for the time being, to leave Derna alone. Their young commander, Lieut. Abraham, told us, " I would like to go down there on foot but my C.O. won't let me, so if you want it, it seems the town is yours."

Through glasses I could see natives gathering in the streets and pointing up to where our cars were outlined against the sky. We tried some means of getting the vehicles past the gaping hole in the road but it was impossible. Then we saw two khaki-clad figures climbing up the side of the pass towards us, a rabble of little native boys at their heels. They proved to be a British sergeant and private who had been captured during the Alamein fighting and brought, as walking wounded, to Derna. They were overjoyed to see us.

" The Arabs told us they had heard the army was pushing on towards Benghazi," the sergeant said, " and we were afraid they wouldn't worry about Derna for some time. You are the first uniforms we have seen. Come right down. We have got thirty-three British wounded in the hospital. You will get a great welcome from them, and from the Arabs too."

We gave the two soldiers a couple of tins of beer and cigarettes, then set off to walk into the town. By the time we reached the bottom of the steep escarpment we found a small crowd of Arabs awaiting us. They saluted and waved us towards a gharry, a one-horse buggy, which had been brought out to lighten the journey for us. Roy Oliver and myself got into this decrepit vehicle which had been built by a Milan coachbuilder thirty-five years before. Drawn by a cadaverous steed like Don Quixote's, we bowled down the hill towards the town walls. Senussi Arabs carrying looted Italian rifles popped up from behind boulders and saluted smartly, some in the fascist manner through sheer force of habit. One or two loosed off a round in salutation, but we told them not to be noisy lest the British Army think the town was resisting, and take appropriate measures.

However, nothing could restrain the exuberance of our escort of some fifty little boys who ran along behind our carriage bawling out very rude slogans about Italians and Germans, and very complimentary remarks about the British and Americans.

By some sort of desert telegraph they seemed to know all about the Americans advancing in Tunisia. Many of them spoke German and Italian, and we conversed with them spasmodically in enemy languages.

We halted at the hospital, doing what we could to help there, then were conducted to the town hall before which a crowd of several hundred strong had gathered. They were milling around, gazing up at the balcony from which fascist tutelage had doubtless accustomed them to expect some sort of harangue from an invading army. A barren flagstaff confronted us, its Italian flag torn down. Not unnaturally nobody possessed such a thing as a Union Jack, so one had to be improvised. The best that could be done was to pin two pieces of red flannel upon a large white handkerchief and the St. George's Cross went up over the municipality to the accompaniment of hand clapping. We went into the mayor's parlour which had been abandoned in a state of disorder, with papers all over the floor, and found there a huge portrait of Mussolini. We stepped out on to the balcony and held the bald Duce's image up to the crowd. They gazed at it in apathetic silence. Then a voice called out "Benito finito!" And we tossed the portrait into the square. With howls of laughter the Arabs seized upon the self-anointed "Protector of Islam," tore his image up and trampled upon it.

Leaving the municipality the crowd was so thick that we could hardly squeeze through. A headman called for order in a stentorian voice and made a little oration in what I was told was very classical Arabic.

"If any citizen has in his house an Italian or German," he said, "I call upon him to hand over the enemy to the English whose soldiers will shortly be in the town. Moslems have nothing to fear from the army which comes from Egypt. But see to it that every European enemy is apprehended."

We were then urged to walk through the covered bazaar. An evergrowing crowd pressed around us and as we entered the

Souk they all began marching in step with us and clapping their hands rhythmically together.

We were of course quite unarmed, as correspondents are obliged to be, and had any hostile elements been there they could have made short work of us. But every one was exuberantly friendly. It seemed to be a feast day for the whole population. All the merchants had shuttered their stalls, perhaps for fear of looting, but as we came along they offered to reopen them if there was anything we wanted to buy. We purchased some Chianti at a ruinous price. From narrow latticed windows faces looked down on us as we were swept through the bazaar. Some clapped their hands, others cheered in European fashion. It was at once highly ridiculous and rather touching. Making full allowance for the fickleness of Oriental crowds, there could be no doubt that the people of Derna were genuinely glad to see any representatives of the army which had beaten the Axis back from Alamein.

We were wafted through Derna like some victorious soccer team through a north-country town. Outside the bazaar our old gharry was waiting and drove us to Graziani's villa where the Senussi insisted on going ahead lest the Italians had left any booby traps behind. They pressed us to stay the night there and said they would mount a guard outside, but having left our vehicles up the hill beyond the blasted road, we had to return there.

Of the young Dernans who accompanied us one wanted to go to London, another had studied French and German in hopes of going to Cairo to become a waiter, another said he had been imprisoned in Tripoli by the Italians for aiding the British during the last occupation, another wanted to join the British Army. I told him he could join the Senussi units who had been trained in Egypt.

Back at the hospital we found a potentially tragic situation maintained on a level keel by two English sergeants, Horace King of the Royal West Kents from Sevenoaks and Holman of the Royal Sussex from Haywards Heath. The wounded there had received no medical attention for five days, so we sent a message back towards Martuba which was picked up by the armoured cars and wirelessly back from there. An Italian priest and four Italian

nuns helped in the hospital, which was as clean as could be expected, although infested with flies. There was little food save rice and bread.

Sergeant King, although he had never had even first-aid training, had done a wonderful job. A seriously wounded man with a brain injury had been tended by him. Others with wounds in a horrible state of gangrene had been cleaned and dressed daily. Some South African natives with terrible wounds received at Tobruk when forced by the Axis to unload ships during the British bombardments, owed their lives to him. The poor blacks, like children, insisted on showing us their hurts. I could scarcely bear to look upon them.

Sergeant King said the Arabs treated them kindly after the Axis fled and brought cigarettes and what food they could find in town. The greatest danger came five nights before when the last Italian hospital ship was sailing from Derna for Italy. Most of the patients were told to stand by for evacuation, but at the last moment a number of wounded British officers were put aboard and the other ranks left behind.

Nine Axis prisoners were held in hospital, four Germans and five Italians. Three of the Germans were captured outside the hospital by Sergeant Holman yesterday. Although Holman was limping on a stick he produced a revolver and disarmed the Germans, who had all walked from Tobruk. One German was a tank sergeant with the Iron Cross.

Whilst we were arranging to have a doctor sent up the first British forces were entering the town on foot, leaving their vehicles as we had done, atop the pass.

To-night we slept in a fort dating from the Italo-Turkish war atop the Derna cliff. Advanced elements of the Eighth Army have already passed south of us in the direction of Benghazi.

Following up the enemy through green hilly country our desert troops experienced hardships as severe as anything met with in Egypt, although completely opposite in kind. It's the rainy season up here fifteen hundred feet above the sea, and at night it is very like sleeping out on the Yorkshire moors in midwinter.

Storms of rain and hail occur several times daily. Streams of water pour down the roads and hillsides. Desert-dusty vehicles are washed clean, empty water containers are filled to overflowing. There is enough for every one to drink and wash in to their heart's content. But it is tough going and bitterly cold for men whose blood is thinned with desert living.

The enemy seems to be attempting a scorched earth policy in so far as anything can be scorched when inches deep in water. All the Italian colonists seem to have been evacuated with their livestock and everything they could carry. There were some 50,000 Italians in Cyrenaica who remained behind during last year's invasion and during Wavell's influx, but so far I have not seen a single Italian save for five soldiers who approached with hands in the air near Giovanni Berta, saying that they were looking for the nearest prisoner of war camp.

We told them to keep walking towards Martuba in hopes of getting a lift in a lorry going that way.

At Cirene the Arab inhabitants came out to welcome us, saying that we were the first British they had seen. I was just thinking, "Is it possible, I wonder, that Ibrahim the Senussi boy in the old British warm coat who found food for us here almost a year ago is still around?" When Ibrahim came running up saying he had been expecting me.

And he was fully prepared for the current invasion season. He knew where to get eggs and tobacco and maybe even a chicken. Would I stay, as last year, at the Cirene Hotel, where Luftwaffe officers had been? He was sorry the French lady who ran the café had been evacuated with her Italian husband, so alas there would be no omelettes or cognac this year.

But we could not stay, and after a hasty look at Cirene's Roman glory, pushed on to the west. Still no sign of any Italian peasantry. We passed scores of white colonial houses all empty, vineyards and fields deserted. At two points the village priest had stayed behind to look after the church, but otherwise Arabs seemed to be in full possession of the countryside, and we saw them getting down to it in the abandoned fields, turning over the rich red soil with wooden ploughs drawn by camels.

The enemy has the advantage of two winding roads which run

through woods and dales between Cirene and Barce to hide snipers and plant ambushes here and there. I saw a British armoured car and tank which had fought quite a little battle near Slonta with a German anti-tank gun-post hidden on the hillside overlooking the road. I saw a handful of German prisoners resulting from this engagement.

The enemy has obviously hoped through mass evacuation to make it hard for us to live off this outwardly green and pleasant country. However, rations, fuel and ammunition are coming up well notwithstanding the great distance involved and Rommel has made us presents of a great variety of useful things. For example I am now sitting on a German collapsible chair typing with a German ribbon through German carbon paper. In this unit we are drinking Italian Chianti and mineral water, eating Italian tinned vegetables, German hams, German bread, smoking German cigarettes, wearing German boots better suited to mud than our desert footwear, driving on captured petrol and oil, and last night we slept in an Italian farmhouse and dried our sodden clothes and bedding before a roaring fire.

Flies are no longer bothersome, but the mosquitoes are very bad. Tank crews unable to stretch out in their vehicles spend nights of pouring rain trying to sleep on the ground whilst mosquitoes, evidently of Axis sympathies, vent their spite on them from dusk to dawn.

Inhabited localities vacated by the enemy are left in a filthy condition. Germans are bad in this respect, the Italians hopeless. The Duce's dupes seem to care less for elementary hygiene than Hottentots. The great Axis hospital at Mameli is in a stinking condition. Someone had loosed off a hand-grenade in the vestry of its chapel and the vestry walls were plastered with photos of nude girls from German magazines.

An Arab shepherd had just approached us with a present of a piece of mutton from his own flock. In return we offer him tinned fruit. With lordly generosity he then shows us a cottage where three Italian machine-guns were hidden and Italian petrol concealed. Deprecating our profuse thanks he astonishes us by observing as he passes on with his sheep, "Churchceell Kwais Kateir," meaning "Churchill is a very good fellow."



The fascist-built settlement at Baracca boasts an imposing church. In most churches along the route of the advance the priest remained behind, but not here. I am not surprised, as just before we arrived a British soldier went into the church at Baracca and had his leg blown off by a booby trap in the nave.

Brave work, fascists of Baracca! You whose houses are painted with huge slogans such as "Many enemies, more honour!" And "Duce, we will conquer!"

You have now added to your enemies the comrades of the soldier whose leg was blown off in your church.

The closer we get to Benghazi the greater appears the emptiness and misery of the countryside. Hundreds of farms and settlements that might have been prosperous have been abandoned. In a hundred miles I did not see a single Italian colonist. They have left behind everything they possess save their clothing. In one farmhouse the carcass of a cow lay on the front steps. In another there was a dead dog in the kitchen. The dogs of the farmers which had been left behind are running around in wild packs ravenous for food. Ploughs and reapers are rusting in the leaky sheds, thousands of acres of fresh ploughed land have not been sown or will not be unless the Arabs can get to work upon them. On many a farm one sees grandiloquent mottoes taken from the speeches of Mussolini, "The Founder of the Empire," and here we are witnessing the collapse of that Empire's last remaining province into abandon and decay.

Some farms housed troops of late, but from many the families have only just departed. You see children's toys scattered about, women's shoes, farmers' worn-out boots, pots of geraniums still bright in curtainless windows.

In Barce as I came through, twenty-four Italian soldiers who had been hiding in the town had just been rounded up and were being marched through streets lined with Arabs who gaped at the predicament of their so-recent overlords.

Geoffrey Keating's property Union Jack flew above a building bearing a huge Mussolini motto, "Better to live one day as a lion than a year as a sheep."

Our tanks rumbling through the narrow streets looked

suddenly monstrous compared with their appearance in the open desert.

A South African fighter pilot from Cape Town asked me for a lift back towards his squadron. He had just walked back three days and three nights from Benghazi, having been forced down after shooting up Benghazi airfield.

"It was what every pilot dreams about," he said. "Our squadron got over the field just as a large number of troop-carrying Junkers 52 were taking off. They rose in a black cloud : then we pounced. I got one and saw it go down in flames, then I hit another and it broke up in the air. I was just diving for a third when its rear gunner must have hit my cooling system, because I got into difficulties and had to crash-land. Fortunately nobody saw where, and I started walking east. An Italian soldier chased me with a rifle at one point, but he was past his first youth and could not catch me as I ran up hill like a goat. I dare not approach the road for fear of meeting retreating Jerries. On the third day I did approach the road and saw German vehicles closely followed by British. Then I realised they were captured enemy cars and ran down to get help. My emergency water and rations kept me going. I was not hungry, but the nights of pouring rain were terrible."

I gave the pilot a tin of beer and he went off on his way declaring he would return to see Benghazi as a tourist on his flat feet in a few days.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### DECLINE AND FALL : THIRD EDITION

BENGHAZI typifies the decline and fall of the second Roman Empire. The devastation is far worse than last year, and that was bad enough. Giant Liberators of the R.A.F. and the American Air Force have been working upon the place since then, and Benghazi is now only a shell of the Rococo capital of stucco and imitation marble it once was.

The first British column entered it from the desert in the south on November 21st. That was the 11th Hussars and Rifle Brigade. The following morning the main body, which included the Scots Greys in giant tanks, 60th Rifles, South African armoured cars, the Derbyshire Yeomanry, also in tanks, sappers and Royal Horse Artillery, swept in coming along the coast road from Tobra and Barce, and since then other units have swelled the garrison. I travelled with the main body.

As we passed beneath the bogus Roman arch erected in Mussolini's honour at the town's eastern approach, the speedometer on our car registered two thousand four hundred and sixty-four miles since leaving Cairo, and we entered Benghazi just twenty-nine days after the first tremendous artillery barrage which began the offensive had boomed forth at Alamein.

We found a town wretched beyond description and a port battered into odd arabesques of twisted iron and concrete. A large Axis ship was still blazing at the harbour's mouth after being bombed by Liberators nine nights ago. The vessel had broken in twain and yet each portion was still alight.

What had once been a pretty half-moon promenade around the harbour presented a miserable picture. Hotels, blocks of flats, restaurants and fascist headquarters of various kinds were all blasted. I have seen no worse scenes of destruction in any English town. Coventry or Plymouth have nothing on Benghazi. The streets are rolled out flat.

What chiefly strikes one is not any particular area of destruction, although the port is certainly full of wrecks and blasted jetties, but the fact that hardly one house in any quarter can be found without damage from blast or splinters upon it, with the exception of the Arab town, that's to say, which is practically untouched. In fact, Benghazi has ceased to be an European town in any sense of the word. It is now just a huddled Arab settlement—with a ruined European quarter appended thereto.

In a wrecked casino on the waterfront we found several score of Indian soldiers who had been taken prisoner at Tobruk and left behind here when the Axis evacuated, and in a hospital fourteen English and South African soldiers, also mostly taken prisoner at Tobruk.

One of them, an English tank driver, told me he had been kept in the prisoners' cage until a few days ago. When the Alamein offensive started his German guard gave him the news, adding, "Your general has made some gains but Rommel has a big surprise for him, he will hold you at Hellfire Pass, then sweep around you and cut you off."

Two days later the same German approached with a look of resignation on his face with his hands crossed as though manacled, and saying, "It seems we shall all be prisoners at Alexandria."

That was the first indication which the prisoners here had that our offensive was going well. The Germans at Benghazi were on poor rations many weeks before the offensive started, this driver added, and when our prisoners complained of poor food the reply was, "It's the British Fleet that blockades us all in North Africa."

A few nights ago a German ammunition ship was hit in the harbour by Allied bombers and burned all night long. All the British prisoners and wounded sat up all night to watch the blaze. "We fair gloated," the tank driver said.

Civilians began to be evacuated from Benghazi a fortnight ago. Soon after, Axis hospital ships came in and evacuated the wounded.

A number of Italian nuns stayed behind to look after the immovable wounded and, at their request, fourteen British prisoners remained with them to help in the hospital and protect

them. As everywhere else in Cyrenaica the Italians seemed afraid of Arab vengeance and tended to rely on British protection.

About four thousand unlucky British prisoners were evacuated from Benghazi to Italy in the last fortnight before the town fell. Thousands of Italian colonists and farmers passed through Benghazi over a period of several weeks past ; most seemed to be heading for Tripoli.

Benghazi was functioning more or less normally until about two weeks ago. Then food began getting scarce and civilians began to leave. Our prisoners said they longed for a good cup of tea and hadn't any sugar for a long time. The Germans left Benghazi about five days ago : Italian troops began leaving then but their evacuation moved more slowly. An Italian tank was still burning as we entered the town, so it seems that the last Italians have not long been gone.

They had made a poor job of demolitions. As we approached the city, under leaden rain clouds and with black smoke ascending from various fires, looked as though it had been sacked, yet when one got in the fires proved to be from a few minor dumps and from one or two tanks and vehicles. The truth is, Benghazi was an Axis supply base of such magnitude that its stores were too widely scattered, for safety, to permit of easy sabotage.

All's quiet in the town to-night after an afternoon of sporadic shooting in the poor quarters. The same excellent military police who directed our tanks up the lighted tracks at Alamein are on duty in the town in their red caps and white webbing equipment. A curfew is being enforced from seven o'clock.

Some two hundred and fifty Jews were out in the streets to-day free of fear for the first time since we occupied the town last year. They showed their appreciation by giving presents of wine and cigarettes to the Tommies. Arab car drivers plied for hire in hopes of getting Tommy customers for a tour of the town, but the aspect of universal destruction was so depressing that they must have secured a poor trade.

Our main tank forces have been moved up on transporters to save wear, but some of the first tanks into Benghazi came all the way from Alamein—seven hundred miles—on their own tracks. They had fought their way through the Rommel lines and all the

way here without maintenance save what the crews could give them on the road—a formidable feat of tankcraft.

Since Rommel began withdrawing from Alamein we have advanced on an average thirty miles each day into country largely waterless and entirely without those stocks of petrol and food which the German Army found and largely depended upon during its comparable stampede through France in 1940.

It has been a remarkable job of staff work.

On our first day in Benghazi all the town would yield was half a dozen eggs, a few tomatoes and radishes and a little bread.

The Germans left behind in a refrigerator one hundred tons of meat, so all our troops had been enjoying fresh steak at Rommel's expense. The enemy tried to ruin the water supply by diverting the conduits through the town sewers, but in a local brewery we found wells yielding tolerable water until the main supply was purified. But there is no denying life in Benghazi is dour and glum—it is hard to find a street with more than a couple of houses still habitable.

I chose a small house which alone, amid piles of rubble, had been repaired, and when I inquired why, an Arab told me it was a "Buit casino—specially for German officers": in other words a bordello, so thanks to the lubricity of the Reichswehr I at least had a roof over my head.

A refreshing view of captivity was revealed in a message which I found left behind in an Italian hospital whose inmates had been taken prisoner. Some Italian Tomasino had scribbled on a telegraph form, "To the Italian government: I am a prisoner of the English, who treat me like an Englishman. Long live the British!"

In occupying Cyrenaica the Eighth Army has won for the Allies a territory as large as France, largely desert, it is true, and with only two hundred thousand inhabitants thanks to the Fascists' repressive policy against the Arabs, yet no less of an administrative responsibility on that account. Right now General Montgomery's political advisers face problems fully as absorbing as those military questions which are being handled down in the desert south of us.

Here is the situation. A British military government has been set up and in a series of proclamations entitled "Cyrenaica : Third British Occupation," Montgomery has laid down a few simple laws under which the administration is being carried out. The victor of Alamein is in effect governor of Cyrenaica and his sway extends through the coastal hill belt, including Derna and Barce, to the ruined town of Tobruk, and from Bardia and the frontier settlements for hundreds of miles into the interior, past the oases of Jarabub and Jalo, so often in the war news, right down to the oasis of Kufra which has been in Allied hands over a year and which, under our protection, has become the centre of the Senussi faith.

The leader of the Senussi people whose spiritual leadership was recognised amongst all Arabs in Cyrenaica is fifty-two years old Said Idris, who is still in Cairo. His brother, Mohammed Erridha es Senussi, one year older, whose person is also sacred to the Senussi, has been in Benghazi throughout the Italian occupation, and was discovered by us when we entered the capital, living in a wretched house in a poor quarter upon a pittance allowed him by the Italians. At one time Mahommed was given six thousand lire a month, but "Butcher Graziani" reduced his pension to three thousand. When we arrived tea was costing two thousand lire per kilo, so it can be imagined how miserably the poor old gentleman was living.

These two elderly brothers are political figures of no small importance. Nearly a year ago during our second occupation, Anthony Eden assured the people of Cyrenaica that there could be no prospect of permitting the sovereignty of the King of Italy to be resumed after the war. The future of Cyrenaica, like that of Libya as a whole, cannot be decided whilst the country is still a battlefield, so meanwhile General Montgomery's men have to get an interim administration working as smoothly as possible.

Said Idris was invited to send a message to his people as soon as the occupation was completed, but he modestly replied that as General Montgomery had delivered his country from the oppressors, the first message should come from him. And so it was. The British commander called upon brother Mahommed here in Benghazi but found him so dispirited through malnutrition

that all political considerations went by the board, and the first job was to see him properly housed and looked after again, and fitting financial arrangements made for him.

When the British general commanding an army corps in the Benghazi area gave an entertainment for the Kadi of Benghazi and other Senussi notables, the chief difficulty was to find a house which was not smashed by bombing, but eventually a mansion with two habitable rooms was located, and with carpets spread everywhere and plenty of good tea (a well-nigh unprocurable luxury under Italian rule) procured, the proceedings were a success.

The Italian's treatment of Mahommed typifies their whole policy, which was as nearly as possible to ignore the Arabs and try to make Cyrenaica again what it was in ancient times—a Roman granary and holiday resort. All the best land went to Italian settlers, and the Arabs were pushed back into the desert. Millions of lire were spent on neat homesteads, schools and churches for the Italians, but no houses were provided for the Arabs, who had to live in tents. In Benghazi a grandiose catholic cathedral was built with an inscription recording its fascist benefactors upon it, but the Senussi received only a mosque not much bigger than a small shop.

The Arabs were forced to attend Italian schools with the result that to-day most speak poor Arabic, with Italian words interlarded. The Italians seem to have tried to stamp out Arab culture. Few Senussi can read or write. They have forgotten many Arab customs and are hazy about the Koran or their own famous poets. In short, the Italians treated them like Red Indians, save that they provided no reservations for them but just drove them back into the desert.

It was in the desert oases, especially at Kufra, that the Senussi resistance was strongest. The Italians took Libya after the Italo-Turkish war of 1911, but the Bedouin Senussi fought them from then up till 1930, when the Italians finally reduced the Kufra oasis.

The Bedouin still think less highly of the coastal Arabs than of the desert dwellers because those on the coast submitted so much earlier to Italian rule.



However, there's no division between Cyrenaica's two hundred thousand Arabs to-day. Right now the difficulty is that with the Italians evacuated from Cyrenaica, the remaining Arabs have been so poorly educated by their Italian masters that it is hard to find among them enough leaders and administrators, even of humble grade, to enable them to run their own affairs satisfactorily. To such a pass has the Fascist façade of marbled grandeur along the coast reduced the once vigorous Arabs of the Hinterland.

An experienced British Arabicist has come from Kufra to grapple with Benghazi's problems. He found 25,000 Arabs in the ruined city, another twenty-five thousand living evacuated on hills nearby, to escape bombing. The Italian administration before fleeing gave the Arabs the keys of the food stores, but when Rommel's rearguard raced up the road and through Benghazi during the retreat they seized all the food they could find, with the result that when we entered the shortage was severe.

At first the Arabs were chary of Egyptian money, thinking doubtless that our third occupation might lead to a third withdrawal, but the exchange is now fixed at 492 Lire to an Egyptian pound, and with streams of British troops going through, confidence is returning.

The Arabs are working in the docks for us at good wages which, at their request, are paid partly in food. In the countryside Arabs are being permitted to work on Italian farms and to produce all they can for the time being, whilst the question of the ultimate ownership remains for settlement when the fighting is over. The coastal Arabs are rich in barrels of petrol and other stores washed up from sunken Italian ships, and there can be few Arabs who have not got all the Axis arms and ammunitions they want. These are being collected by their chiefs and returned to arsenals.

Every public utility was smashed by the Fascists. There is no printing press in all Cyrenaica, so at first the issuing of government orders was difficult. But now loudspeaker vans are being provided by the army so that Arabic-speaking officers can tour around telling the population the news and reading out government proclamations.

Arabic posters printed in Cairo were rushed up by air and widely displayed.

Considering the civilian needs must take second place with a fresh battle pending now around the Gulf of Sirte, we do seem to have made a fair start in meeting them. There can be no doubt of the Senussi's hatred of the Italians. The Germans, they say, behaved well, probably because when dirty work had to be done the Germans got the Italians to do it for them and posed as disinterested visitors the whole time.

At Kufra the Italians buried the Mahdi, the venerated father of Said and Mahommed, in an Italian fort and discouraged his followers from visiting the shrine. The Senussi wanted to move the body from this polluted place, and we have consulted Said Idris about reburying the body in a new mosque.

Among the verdant hills hundreds of Italian homesteads lie abandoned. The Bedouin is coming in from his long exile in the desert to gaze upon them. A ramshackle European civilisation lies in ruins. The Arab feels the land is his at last. Yet he does not know what to do with it. The departed white man has bequeathed him a desert within a desert.

Meanwhile the British Tommy, as so often before, finds himself cast not only as a fighter but as an administrator and an ambassador from a freer world.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE CHASE TO SIRTE

ROMMEL abandoned Mersa Brega on December 13th. The first line of the famous Agheila defences composed of salt marshes and water obstacles to which the beaten marshal fell back after his defeat at Alamein was now securely in British hands.

Our aircraft spotted the preliminary signs of withdrawal two days before we got in. The air officer commanding in the desert, Air Vice-Marshal Conyngham, himself flew over the enemy's lines and saw their transport moving away. Then the German radio was heard by us here in the desert describing a so-called big British bombardment followed by an attack. It declared that the German forces were falling back in the face of heavy odds.

Pure moonshine ! We had neither attacked nor bombarded. We merely had patrols out sparring for weak spots. The rest was just Dr. Goebbels's customary dose of physic to prepare his German patients for a shock. In the same way he announced the withdrawal from Alamein some little while before it truly got under way.

In the last few days when our patrols went out they saw more than the usual pyrotechnic display of Verey lights at night and heard a good deal of excited shouting and firing from Italian posts. The enemy were seen to be taking precautions against a possible encircling movement by us, way to the south of his marshy defences. After a week in which the Luftwaffe had been giving our forward troops a nasty time, especially with Stukas, the R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. got more planes into the air as petrol supplies flowed more freely through Tobruk and Benghazi, and the enemy air forces were pushed back. The Stukas were driven right off their aerodromes and pushed too far back to be of any use, and Marble Arch landing grounds were denuded of all save a skeleton cover of fighters.

Two days ago a strong British raiding party appeared off a

strong point called Ariosto about fifteen miles south of Mersa Brega, near Bir es Suera. They found panzer grenadiers of the 15th Panzer Division installed there and broke into the post, returning with prisoners. Later the same day, the enemy re-occupied Ariosto, and German tanks were whistled up as protection against a further attack.

About the same time another strongpoint named Dante, just behind Mersa Brega, began to be evacuated. The enemy were detected laying mines across the road and trying to block the narrow area between the sea and the edge of the salt marsh with concrete blocks and various kinds of booby traps.

What made Rommel withdraw?

Our possession of Benghazi and the daily increasing use we obtained from it meant that Rommel's line of communication all the way from Tripoli now compared poorly with ours for length. Agheila-Tripoli is 500 miles. Benghazi—Mersa Brega not quite 150 miles. True, our real base must remain the Nile Valley, over 800 miles distant, but his true base was Italy, with the dangerous sea passage in between. So Rommel may well have thought it advantageous to stretch our line of communication farther and shorten his own, calling a halt at last to the desert war and concentrating upon the defence of five key points reasonably close together—Tripoli, Gabes, Sfax, Tunis and Bizerta.

Idle to deny that our preference to-day, as always, would be to polish off the Africa Korps once for all in the desert. But if it is necessary to go all the way to Tripoli to do this, we can make it. Our supply line necessitates spartan living. But wonders are being performed. One morning in the desert near Agedabia I awoke at dawn with the roar of fourteen great American transport planes landing nearby with supplies aboard. Flown by Americans and with white stars shining on their dark wings, they passed so low that I could read their names, "Hoosier Hotspot," "Hedge-Hopper," "Carolina Glory." The instant they unloaded they flew off eastwards for more.

A great number of tank transporters came rattling up to the front, and although we are at such a great distance from Alexandria the traffic on the desert tracks seems almost as thick as when we were at Alamein. Every one of these thousands of

vehicles going forward has to carry sufficient petrol to enable it to get back. Here, where I am, over nine hundred miles from the Nile Valley, I had no difficulty in drawing my week's rations, food and water, and enough petrol and oil to last me for several days hard driving—a great work of organisation by the R.A.S.C., when you think of it.

The weather is shocking—storms of rain and cold just like they must be having at home. As at Alamein, our enemy had been retreating into a sodden, icy desert overhung with inky clouds. The desert is horrible at this time of the year. But it is far more horrible when you are retreating.

There is no point in suggesting that if Rommel now wishes to flee all the way to Tripoli we will stand much chance of cutting him off. The terrain hereabouts is very difficult and does not lend itself to encircling movements. So if he wants to make good his escape he can probably do so. We shall not be lured into following him through the badlands along the Gulf of Sirte save at our own speed.

Yet it remains an astonishing thing that he should be willing to surrender these excellent Agheila positions whereon he spent so much time and trouble. Apart from the natural obstacles at Agheila itself, the country just eastward thereof is first-rate defensive tank country. I can't for the life of me understand any commander leaving these rolling heathlike wastes unless he had to. Every thousand yards or so you find hillocks thirty to forty feet high, just right for tanks to get hull down behind and pick off approaching tanks which would be in nice range as they breasted each rise. There is scrub and gorse aplenty to nestle anti-tank guns in.

When the torrential rains halted briefly the desert burst forth into flower. Beneath an azure sky white poppies waved and danced—symbols of a white withdrawal, not the red poppies of battle. When we had a chance to halt we got our sodden bedding out to dry in the sun and hung on bushes clothes damp after days of rain.

Famous faces were to be seen in the forward areas. There was a brave display of scarlet and gold as cars shot by taking Alexander and Montgomery up to assess the situation on the

spot. And so Agheila fades from the history books. Alamein remains.

Rommel is going fast and far from Agheila and there is no knowing where he may go. He is making a clever, well thought out withdrawal. Air reconnaissance shows no evidence of his stopping short of Nofilia at least, which is about half-way between Agheila and Sirte and seventy-five miles from the former. He may well go considerably farther. He planned this retreat with care and this narrow coastal belt is in some ways ideal for a retreating army, although it is giving the R.A.F. good targets to aim at, as the presence of great sweeps of our aircraft, fifty and sixty aloft at one time, show.

The enemy has sown mines on a prodigious scale to slow up our advance. But we are following him up hotly considering the many obstacles in the way.

Rommel's use of mines caused a British colonel of many years experience to remark to me at a forward point of our advance that he had never seen anything like this minefield before, and not only mines but trickery and booby traps of all kinds.

Arriving at the point where our sappers were clearing a road just outside Agheila, I heard explosions and saw plumes of smoke rising from the huddled hamlet itself. Nobody was in there. The enemy had flown. All the noise was coming from delayed action mines. I watched sappers sweeping a wide area with mine detectors, much as a water diviner uses a divining rod. There were mines embedded in the tarmac road itself, and thick along the sides and underneath them were all sorts of combinations of tricks to try and kill the men who were going to lift them.

Small anti-personnel mines are attached by bits of wire to larger ones and dug deeper, so when you immunise and lift the large one the smaller one will go off. Our sappers are up to most of these tricks by now and it is rarely the Germans succeed in springing a new one on them. Nevertheless it is dangerous work and it gives one a queer feeling to see these men, many mere boys, moving methodically over ground which they know is alive with high explosive, with the posture and the same mild intentness one might devote to a game of croquet.

Once or twice just outside Agheila, the enemy had blown the road on a small embankment, necessitating diversions being cut through the sand at the side. And naturally they would dig mines into the place where they guessed our diversions would have to pass. Once I saw a British soldier lying dead on the road. His comrade sappers were unemotionally lifting mines all around him so that they could reach his side and take his body away. But they still had scores of yards to go and he lay there isolated.

A little farther a padre was saying the burial service over another of our men. Three of his pals were standing by. One had his few personal effects under his arm. Another knelt down to lay the dead man's tinhat and mess-tin on the grave.

But, as the colonel said, "We have had a few losses from mines and booby traps, but really we must count ourselves lucky to have got this whole Agheila line without fighting for it. Some lives sacrificed through this cowardly form of warfare are better than the losses we would have had to face in a full-scale attack on this place."

It's mines, mines all the way. Mines and how to deal with them absorb every single one of us. Every few yards one sees German mines as big as soup plates which have been lifted. In one place I counted 300 in a pile—£900 worth of hate that miscarried.

Areas alongside the road which have been swept clear are marked with white tape to show vehicles where it is safe to pull off and to park for the night.

One does not park unless one sees the tape. But despite all the barriers in our path there is no halting unless it is essential.

Hurried meals are eaten cold as we chug along. I saw a despatch rider ride up behind a 'chuck wagon' and catch a packet of biscuits thrown to him out of the back. That was his lunch for the day.

Apart from the wind, the weather seems the cruellest enemy of both sides. It's treacherous pneumonia weather—fine for an hour or two then suddenly broken by sousing rains and gales of icy wind. For a while you bask in the sun whilst flies swarm round your food and bite you just like in the Egyptian summer time, then come torrents of rain which leave pools of water everywhere,

particularly in the holes in the sand we dig to sleep in at night. I have had incipient dysentery for a week now and feel awful. The sulphanilamide the M.O. is giving me makes me feel suicidal. There is no natural shelter of any kind against the elements. Before us there stretches hundreds of miles of sweet nothing. As our men push on well into Tripolitania I think they are facing conditions as hard as anything these last two years of desert war have produced.

Those fresh out from home seem to be standing up to it better than the old desert rats. I suppose it is what they have been used to on the Yorkshire moors or the Grampians in midwinter. Indeed some of the new boys still prefer to wear shorts, although battledress is available. Such toughness in their captors astonished Italian prisoners who had emptied sandbags to wrap themselves up against the cold.

But why, oh why, do Italians always take off their boots when they retreat? I have just been through an Italian trench full of discarded boots. Plus love letters, anti-British postcards and cheap devotional pictures trodden into the mud and all mixed up together. Bersaglieri cock's feathers, also forlornly litter the desert. So far the only useful find has been a wagon full of Italian stomach powder and bottles of cascara.

"What, no castor oil?" said a medical wag, enumerating the spoil. Appropriately enough, the Fascists have taken their own traditional medicine. Not a single Fascist remains in Cyrenaica. And now for the purging of Tripolitania.

Spirits are high as we push forward past Marble Arch, where grandiloquent murals depict the Duce handing over to Victor Emmanuel an Empire now virtually non-existent; past the Wadi Rigel, past Nofilia. And still the enemy shows no signs of halting. But his mining and baiting with booby traps is getting thicker than ever and the road has been blown up in many places.

We have had a good many casualties on mines but it is an expensive business for the enemy. Reckoning each German mine as costing about three pounds sterling, only about one in every thousand strewn destroys a British vehicle or takes a British life.



It thus costs the enemy three thousand sterling for each vehicle damaged.

Spirits are high because it really looks as though we might be in Tripoli first after all. Way back at Alamein, when the Eighth Army first heard that Eisenhower's men were hammering the Axis from the other end, we pretty well resigned ourselves to the prospect that they would have the honour of reaching Tripoli first. But now the fortunes of war may rule otherwise. And what a fine thing if they did, for after all the Eighth Army has been fighting for two years with Tripoli as its goal and well the old desert rats deserve this reward.

Perhaps not many with us to-day saw the first Wavell campaign as well as the second and third, though we have with us men from the 7th Armoured Division, men of the Signals, of R.A.S.C. and Artillery who have been in the desert over two years with scarcely any intermission, and some whose experience of the Libyan desert goes right back to 1936 and 1937, never a sight of England in between. If ever men deserved a Roman triumph, these veterans do. But of course they won't get one and don't expect one. As soon as they have put the desert behind them for the last time there will be no junketing but they will all get ready for the next job.

The nearer we get to Tripoli the more the problem of what to do with all the Italian settlers and civilians huddled into this last remaining corner of Italian Africa must worry the Axis military authorities. If the precedent of the East African campaign is taken, the tendency would be for the Italian military to leave the Italians in the towns to shift for themselves, and to surrender the townships, whilst the troops withdraw into defensible positions for a last stand. We cannot tell if that precedent may be repeated, but we do know that the damage in Tripoli exceeds anything that can be shown comprehensively on aerial photographs, and that their use of the port compares unfavourably with our use of Benghazi, even though we have had the latter scarcely one month.

The city of Tripoli with its civilian inhabitants may well prove more of a handicap to the defending army than otherwise.

My dysentery being no better, I shall have to return to Cairo

to get it cured. Besides the paper wants me to go to India. I have not the least desire to leave the Eighth Army, having come with them so far, but apparently something is expected to happen soon in Burma, and Norman Stuart is to take over from me. Before leaving, I hand over my Christmas box of cigars and a bottle of whisky to the boys who stay behind, for the spearhead of the Eighth Army will eat a Christmas dinner of tinned meat and vegetable stew (the famous "M. and V."), biscuits and tinned fruit and tea as they continue the pursuit of the enemy this Christmas day.

Everything that could give a little suggestion of festivity has been sacrificed so that the pursuit may go on. Our British tank crews, our lorried infantry, sappers and gunners from the home countries and the north-country and the New Zealand shock troops will go upon an austerity standard that would make Lord Woolton or Sir Stafford Cripps wince—so that no time may be lost in getting to Tripoli.

There will be no beer, no whisky and certainly no turkey or plum pudding for them. It just is not possible to supply such things, for one case of four dozen bottles of beer, for example, takes up as much space as six shells for one of our field guns.

Farther back, the Eighth Army men in Benghazi and Tobruk will do fairly well, but once you get beyond Benghazi every gallon of petrol and water and each case of bully beef counts where airmen are risking their lives bringing down aeroplanes crammed to overflowing and far over normal weight with essential supplies upon landing grounds like pocket handkerchiefs.

Along the immense line of communication over a thousand miles long, however, the following cheerful quantities of good things have been sent flowing—thirty-five thousand pounds of turkey, sixteen thousand pounds of other poultry, thirty thousand pounds of pork, forty thousand pounds of Christmas pudding, twenty-five thousand pounds of Christmas cake, eight tons of mixed nuts. All this will reach units which are within a reasonable distance from the Nile Valley. It could not be and is not intended for the frontline troops, who will have to celebrate a postponed feast once their job has been completed.

Brian Robb's cartoon in the desert soldiers magazine *Crusade*

shows a tank crew waving aside Father Christmas and his reindeer with the caption, "Sorry, too busy." That's the frontline spirit to-day.

It would be pretty mean, I think, to suggest there is going to be much sweetness and light about in forward areas this Christmas Day. Last year was different. We entered Benghazi Christmas morning, some of us having picked up chickens along the road. My party, I recall, even found an Italian farmer with a turkey and bought it off him.

This year there were no Italian farmers and no turkeys. There are, however, many thousands of steel mines. These have to be lifted, Christmas Day or no, and there will be no settling down around the field cooker in the evening until the sites have been thoroughly gone over and it has been made quite certain your unit is not settling down to some Ersatz festivity on top of a minefield.

Some units have radios to give them a little cheerful music. Most, having been on the move all day long, will prefer to turn in soon after their meal, for the cold is piercing and rain frequent, and probably the best way to spend Christmas night will be to be rolled up inside some good blankets with a little bit of canvas rigged up over the top.

There will be a good deal of cursing and more black marks notched up against Rommel for causing us to spend Christmas so barbarously, but most of the lads I think will just try and forget it is Christmas at all and consider it a movable feast to be celebrated by those who can on the 25th of December, but by those who are marching on Tripoli only when they get there.

Maybe, perhaps, and again maybe . . .—depending very much on whether we make Rommel disgorge there as many Danish hams, hogsheads of Chianti and tinned delicacies as we did when we captured Mersah Matruh and Tobruk.

So raise your glasses to the men who will be keeping on rolling up Rommel on Christmas Day! They look up from their plates of tinned stew and toast you in chipped and battered mugs of boiling dark brown tea.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### FAREWELL, DESERT RATS !

IT WAS a great wrench to leave the Eighth Army.

I returned to Cairo and laid up for a few days to wrestle with the dysentery bugs. It was not a merry period. The extreme depression which the disease induces, added to the general sense of "morning after the night before" which then prevailed in Cairo, coupled with the assumption of my foreign editor that great things were imminent in Burma and that therefore I was likely to remain in India a long while, threw me in such a state of gloom as I had not experienced for years.

My alleviation was the presence of Paul Bewsher of the *Daily Mail*. Paul is one of the greatest bohemians English journalism ever produced, and an extremely witty fellow. He figures in a number of Fleet Street novels. The aphorisms which he mixes with his gin produce an absolutely individual Bewsher cocktail. I believe Paul has inspired one of the characters of Nathaniel Gubbins. No more diverting presence could hover over my sick bed, and I saw a lot of him in those days when I was awaiting a passage to India.

My last day in Cairo was a good one. I lunched with Willy Forrest of the *News-Chronicle* and Gordon Young of the *Express* at Shephard's and dined with Paul Bewsher and Edwin Tetlow. We roared around the dusty old city trying to visit every place of call in one evening and (I think) succeeding.

When we finally got back to my room for a farewell libation I found my dressing-table mirror covered in messages, scrawled in dog Arabic and pigeon English, in lipstick. Highly improper in tone, they purported to be farewell reproaches from a number of mistresses. They had been there all day, to the scandal of the staff of Shephard's—for Paul had got into my room and done his wicked worst early.

Next day I boarded the flying boat *Cambria* at Rod el Farag

on the Nile with a highly mysterious looking parcel under my arm. Covered with red seals, it was addressed, "Field Marshal Wavell, C.-in-C., India." It was six feet in length and might have been anything from a new secret weapon to the complete plans for the coming campaign against the Japs.

It was, in point of fact, a wedding dress for the field marshal's daughter who was about to be married in Delhi to her father's A.D.C.

Armed with this impressive talisman, I wafted myself towards India with the maximum of smoothness.

William Phillips, who had been American Ambassador in Rome to the bitter end, was on board on his way to become Roosevelt's personal representative in India. The few words I had with him on the journey confirmed my first impression that, had the United States Government decided to intervene actively in the Indian problem they would certainly not have selected Mr. Phillips as ambassador. I thought that his previous career had shown him to be a conservative career diplomat and a 'non-interventionist' by nature.

*Cambria*—a dear old flying boat built six years earlier—had once flown the Atlantic in ten hours and thirty minutes. She showed her metal again when we came down on the Dead Sea and struck such rough weather there that we had to wait an hour before it was considered safe to take off. Sixty minutes of extreme discomfort supervened. It was oppressively hot inside the cabin and the ethereal vessel dipped and wallowed among the waves as she lay at anchor until even a naval officer on board turned green and parted with his breakfast. It seemed extraordinary that her paper-thin hull could withstand such a buffeting, and when we finally took off the waves struck her sides as brutally as cannon shells from a Messerschmidt.

We pointed our prow over the valley of the Jordan towards the weary stretches of the Syrian Desert.

Flying over Arabia Deserta I think back upon all those wastes I knew in the Libyan Desert. And I feel homesick for the 'blue' and the Eighth Army. Now I am flying away from it all I begin to realise how unique those eighteen months in and out of the

desert were. I reflect that brothers and husbands who are qualifying as 'desert rats' there now, are piling up experience unparalleled in all the annals of war, for never since conquering Cambyses marched upon Siwa and perished in the Desert with his host has an army so large carried on warfare so long in any desert of this world.

Surely when it is all over there should be a special medal for our Desert Rats. However long the war may last nothing can ever equal (for conditions will never be quite the same) the record of some of the great desert units like the 7th Armoured Division, the Rifle Brigade and the 60th Rifles with their wizard anti-tank guns, the Eleventh Hussars and the King's Dragoon Guards, the 4th Indian Division under General Messervy and now under American born General Briggs, the 2nd South African Division under that gunner of genius the late great General "Danny" Pienaar who did more than any man, I think to halt the Germans at El Alamein, the Australian division that held Tobruk under the prim little schoolmaster General Morshead, the Highland Division who crashed through ten thousand yards of hell at El Alamein and the fabulous Long-Range Desert Group.

Most of these desert warriors, if you could contact them this instant, would tell you how they hate the place and long to get out of it. Many of them have been there two years and over, naturally without home leave and with only brief spells in Cairo and Alexandria to break the monotony. Yet it is strange how attractive the desert seems in retrospect compared with many other theatres of war. As an arena for slaughter there is much to be said for a sandy heathland without a single civilian to get in the way or any pleasant places or buildings to ruin, where the hottest days are always cooler than in Cairo and the nights invariably pleasant. War in the desert is clean. Pestilence and famine do not follow the sword. There are no unpleasant insects, few snakes, no insidious diseases, no 'infiltration' or stabs in the back by an enemy disguised as a tree or a 'friendly native.' It is kill or be killed in the open, ball striking ball upon a smooth billiard table. And if you are taken prisoner there is a fair chance of escape. In that immensity hundreds of men have got away.

Yes, on going to meet the wily Jap in the green wet wilds of

Burma the recollection of sallying forth against the petulant Itie or the solid Boche upon that world of waste and sunshine seems almost attractive. I expect to meet the same kind of men in Burma as I met out in the Blue, yet I cannot imagine they could ever form the same attachment for the land they are fighting in as the Eighth Army has done these last two tremendous years.

I have known the Eighth Army in triumph and defeat—men of whom Montgomery said on the eve of the battle of Alamein, "The soldiery will never let you down—they are first-class," then he added, "but I could let them down, I and my staff officers ; that is why we must do right by our men."

They were always first-rate, but no one can appreciate quite how great is the triumph they won at El Alamein who did not taste the defeat in June of that year.

At the end of June the Eighth Army appeared beaten, yet in three days it stopped Rommel sixty-five miles from Alexandria. Then held him there for four months until enough strength had been amassed to strike and send him reeling twelve hundred miles back again.

On June 23rd I find that I had written in my diary : "We are falling back on El Alamein. Must have lost nearly seventy thousand killed, wounded and taken prisoner, and the best we can do is to try to hold him. We cannot counter-attack. We are too weak. We lost this battle in Libya because we remained too long on the defensive. When our counter-attack did come it was never pressed right home. Some may blame the commanders who tried to hold Tobruk at all cost when the withdrawal of the whole army to the frontier was still possible. But who could tell that the fortress which withstood nine months of siege would collapse after only twenty-six hours? What of the men who must now defend the Nile valley to the last? If anger is a good morale builder, and I believe it is, then their morale has never been higher. For they are very angry. Some of them remember their history of the Crimea War and truly this battle has much more in common with that curious campaign than the Russo-German struggle now being fought out in the Crimea to-day. If another charge of the Light Brigade be ordered here in the desert we may be sure that the outcome would be as glorious, even though the apposite line

in the poem would still be 'e'en though they knew full well someone had blundered.' Again our men are fortified by that strange British belief that they cannot be beaten, that somehow they will win the last battle. We certainly live up to our oldest traditions in this campaign. To-day the bitter and unnecessary defeat. To-morrow the victory? Yes, I think we will just pull it off."

And pull it off they did although, back in Cairo where I lay sick on July 1st, they came into my room and told me, "A German armoured division is reported to have broken loose heading straight for Cairo and will be here to-morrow morning; anti-tank ditches are manned around the Pyramids and Mena House."

A panzer patrol did in fact try to cut around the Kattara depression but were headed off. All day gunfire was heard in the streets of Alexandria. On July third I returned to the desert and, entering the Alamein Box, found German tanks south of us nearly cutting us off. But that was the farthest they got. Inside the Box all was calm. After the excitement in Cairo where papers were being burned and suitcases packed, I found the Eighth Army fantastically and fatalistically confident. That I think was their greatest hour, in decisiveness second only to the battle of Britain. Had Egypt fallen, not only would the junction between the Axis partners and Japan have become well-nigh certain but we would have lost in the Middle East ten years' accumulation of warlike stores—a blow from which I don't think we could ever have recovered.

I find difficulty now in visualising that the long war in the desert is drawing to a close. Let us hope that never again will 141 black-crossed planes bomb us simultaneously in Tobruk, never again will the sands of Sidi Rezegh and Sidi Omar be stained with blood, or men fight a whole month between El Gubi and Maddalena unwashed, unshaven, existing on three mugs of water a day.

Between us we military scribblers have, conservatively, written fifty million words about the Eighth Army yet we know we failed to put the whole great story across. Perhaps only a coloured film directed by a genius could do justice to it, and even then a hundred thousand men should be his technical advisers!



Farewell then, Desert Rats. I am sore at heart to go.

But what fun we will have after the war when all the sandbags are emptied, lying on the kitchen floor fighting our battles over again, in a few handfuls of sand . . .

Doubtless for the edification of our ambassador, our pilot takes us a little bit off our course to fly over the ruins of Babylon. We circle the perimeter several times, quite low, the outlines of streets and houses are clear from the air, clearer I believe than they are from the ground for little but the foundations remain. Of the Hanging Gardens there is no more trace than Baghdad can show of the splendours of Haroun el Raschid. A few pillars are still erect. For the rest, it is just a pattern of broken grey mud bricks barely discernable from the desert.

The mind just cannot absorb the thought that this ash-heap below was once the greatest city the world had ever seen. I find it as hard to swallow this as it is to realise the infinite inaccessibility of the planets in terms of light-years. Babylon in the Bible seems real. Babylon before the eye seems but a fable, a figment of mythology.

That night I knew again the excellent airport hotel at Basra and, at 2.30 the next morning, we were up again to face a twelve-hour flight down the Persian Gulf to Karachi.

We take off up a lighted runway on the waters of the Shat el Arab and the dawn rises rosily to greet us as we head towards Bahrein. After two hours' flying we come down here for breakfast.

Bahrein is a charming place—clean Moorish looking houses on a green island set in the pale blue sea. Pink pearls and petrol are its *raisons d'être*, and the wealth of its native pearl fishers has produced something unique in Arabia—a city truly Arabic in character, not tainted by Westernism, yet yielding nothing to the West in seemliness.

We come ashore at a spotlessly kept pier of great length, and after a walk of about a quarter of a mile come to a small rest-house built over the water of the lagoon. Here an excellent breakfast is on the table, served by Arab boys wearing green turbans and white gloves.

My neighbour-passenger, a Japanese lady married to a British

officer who is going to Delhi to teach her native language to British intelligence officers, is charmed by all this and says that if India is anything like Bahrein, then India will be a fine place indeed.

I am bound to tell her, from what I have heard, old opaque India is by no means to be compared with this clear Arab gem. But that if she is brave enough to contemplate teaching Japanese to Englishmen then she will surely overcome any topographical disappointments connected with so overwhelming a task. But as the day wears on and hour after hour the drear outlines of southern Persia drift endlessly by like some volcanic lunar landscape, the face of the poor little Japanese lady itself becomes less lunar, but longer and longer.

Clearly she is beginning to believe that she has contracted to spend the rest of the war in a world of nightmare. What a contrast with Surbiton whence she has flown post-haste, and where she was happy !

Southern Persia looks as though it concealed all manner of mineral wealth behind its repellent mask. But for hundreds of miles it does not appear to support a single human life.

Twelve hours is too long to sit in any aeroplane, even a ship of character like the *Cambria*, and one which boasts a "promenade deck." Acute fidgetophobia develops among the passengers who have played solitaire *ad nauseam* and slept themselves into a fair state of spleen. One is reduced to childlike distractions such as retiring to the washroom for the fun of shaving oneself whilst batting along at 150 miles an hour, lingering over an act of nature which acquires drollery through being performed at 10,000 feet.

But India, like death, came to all of us at long last.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### A PASSAGE TO INDIA

ALTHOUGH I can scarcely have had a sentient moment in India (I left it before I was two years of age), I have always felt that those eighteen months of infancy spent in the dusty cantonment of squalor must have given me a secret vein of Anglo-Indian experience so that whenever I read or heard tell of Indian life, the authentic smells and sights of the sub-continent came before me as though I myself had actually holidayed in Kashmir or pigged it in a Calcutta chummery.

Now I was to put this theory to the test. The curtains were drawn over the flying-boat's windows as we approached Karachi (this was for security) and it was dark as we drove into the town, but no sooner had I entered the lobby of the Carlton Hotel than I knew that my sense of pre-experience was true. This was India just as I had fore-known it—the wicker chairs, the wrinkled Edwardian chintzes, the all-pervading odorous dust, the fly-blown mirrors embellished with whisky advertisements, the creaking punkahs, the iron bedstead in the truly awful bedroom (I poked cautiously in corners to test them for snakes), the bathroom with its colonies of ants and spiders. . . .

Later I was to know a different India, the bright cleanliness of Bombay, the excellent Swiss hotel in Delhi—but these are not typical. It was satisfying to spend the first night in India in surroundings which so wonderfully came up to expectations . . . expectations which owed something also to long family association, for the first Jacob came to India about 1820, and scores of uncles and cousins have been making their livings under John Company or the Raj ever since. Some were Nabobs but most were soldiers.

An economist would find it interesting to reckon the total of wealth which my family has derived from India. It would be a very considerable sum. During the past twenty years it can scarcely have amounted to less than £15,000 each year. The

family gave India a field marshal and a dozen generals of whom the greatest was John Jacob, pacifier of Sind and founder of Jacobabad, which has the unenviable reputation of being the hottest town in the country. And India, in return, gave them, generation after generation, the sort of living which a family which dropped out of the squirearchy through the loss of its land in the eighteenth century, could scarcely have expected elsewhere. It is true that in 1939 the British investment in India was far less than in the Argentine, but what matters to many a family like mine is not the money on which rentiers draw interest in London, but the opportunity for jobs in the country concerned. Thus the day on which the British leave India for good will be a grievous one for families such as these.

On the other hand, had we concentrated a tithe of the effort we have put into India upon Canada or New Zealand, would it not have been more rewarding? Our withdrawal from India would free not merely money but human resources for re-investment in the Dominions. And that should be a good thing. For my part, I stayed away from India with intent, feeling that Jacobs had been there long enough, and preferring the risks of Fleet Street to the security of a career in one of the regiments my great-uncle had founded.

And now my first feeling towards this country was one of repulsion. Yet I was attracted at the same time—attracted by the prospect of seeing much in a short time, of travelling through the country without having to remain. Perambulation without responsibility—a pleasant sensation.

And I felt the need to relieve some of my crushing weight of ignorance about this vast conglomeration of one-fifth of the human race for whom our British Parliament is still responsible. That opportunity came at once for *Cambria* was laid up a day for repairs to one of her engines and, while William Phillips was whisked away in another plane to taste the splendours of Vice-regal hospitality in Delhi, the rest of us had time on our hands and no lack of volunteers to tell us all we wanted to know. Indeed one of the compensations about India is the facility of the Indian in *obiter dicta*—quite Irish in scope and, of course, just what the visiting journalist needs. Ask an Indian: "What is that building

over there?" and he will launch out into the life stories of its architect, its owner, detail the furniture it contains and throw in, for good measure, a little disquisition on the origins of the building materials employed. They are gluttons for information.

Driving around Karachi in a *gharry* with some Indian officers, I marked the clean, wide streets, the clear air. Karachi is a desert town scooped, with the aid of a little water, out of the gritty wastes of Baluchistan which, incidentally, seem to breed enormous camels. Drawing crude wooden carts behind them with high shafts, these camels provide the chief means of transport. I marked the frequency of the slogan "British, Quit India!" on the walls yet our troops seem to be well received, and there seems a considerable tolerance on both sides springing no doubt from the topsy-turvy nature of the whole situation.

Congressite books like *India Explained* which depict India groaning under the foreign yoke and written avowedly for Allied soldiers, are offered for sale side by side with Communist pamphlets calling for a 100 per cent war effort. Russian films seem popular here and it seems a pity that no Soviet mission, either civil or military, has come to India if only to give the lie to newspapers such as the *Hindustan Times* which still trumpets—"The larger part of the world continues to look on the present war as a clash of rival Imperialisms." But I suppose Russians would find it embarrassing to visit a country whose main concern is the war against Japan. The same paper gives the great German retreat from the Caucasus second place to huge headlines which proclaim "Professor Bhansali Breaks Fast after 63 Days." This turns out to be a squabble between the professor and the Central Provinces Government concerning the alleged misbehaviour of Indian soldiers towards some village maidens which prompted the learned gentleman to go on hunger strike to substantiate their honour—an Indian way of "writing to the *Times* about it."

There seem to be more American than British troops about, and in the cinemas they play the "Star Spangled Banner" as well as "God Save the King." At the same time, there are now more British regiments in India than at any time since the British entered the country. Field-Marshal Wavell now has nearly two million men under his command—the majority Indian regiments,

of course—which makes this the largest United Nations force facing the enemy anywhere to-day—with the exception of the Red Army.

Why then does every one I meet emphasise that the present operations in Burma, down the Mayu Peninsula and in Arakan, are “terribly small scale”? The gossip is that Wavell, that master of deception who out-foxed Graziani in Libya in 1940, has “something up his sleeve,” and that these pee-wee operations cautiously feeling out towards the Jap-held port of Akyab bear little relation to the major project brewing. That project, I would say, would be bound to include a landing from the sea, possibly at Rangoon itself. And I don’t suppose that right now Wavell has anything like the shipping, much less the landing-craft, at his disposal which such an operation would demand. So it doesn’t look as though I were going to see anything exciting in Burma.

As to the political side, my first impression is faintly favourable. There is much less complacency among our own people than I had been led to believe existed. Nearly every one I meet admits the situation could and should be improved. About 400 leading Congressmen are detained ; some of the smaller fry have been released, but it is estimated that there are about 30,000 ‘politicals’ in prison in the country as a whole—some merely thugs or terrorists.

How tenuous is our hold upon this country ! Apart from the British troops temporarily here, there are only about 30,000 European males in the whole of India, including Greeks, French and others who would doubtless remain even if the British Raj withdrew. Our direct investment in India has decreased from some £300 million sterling, and to-day amounts only to about 19 days of our war expenditure, or say £230 millions. If the war ends reasonably soon, this amount will be more than cancelled out by the sterling balance India will hold in London, which will be at least £300 millions, probably more. From the aspect of material interest in the country, therefore, we might as well pack our traps and be gone to-morrow. The biggest commercial interests in the country are in Indian hands, and the process of Indianisation in government has gone far further than I supposed.

Of 800,000 railway employees, for example, only 3500 are

Europeans ; of 2500 judges of all grades, only 230 are Europeans ; in general administration there are 5500 Indians, only 630 Europeans ; in the high ranks of the Civil Service 585 Europeans against 617 Indians ; in the Police 400 Europeans against 200 Indians ; in the engineering department 128 Europeans and 199 Indians ; Forests department, 97 Europeans, 82 Indians.

The growing self-reliance of Indian industry is shown by the fact that out of some 60,000 articles required by a modern mechanised army India manufactures about 35,000.

The basic grievance of India, whence all others spring, is, I believe, the control exercised over the country by a British Parliament chosen by an electorate which 'necessarily knows little or nothing of India. The 1935 Constitution, still operative, explicitly asserts that sovereignty lies in the British power, that is with the British Crown represented by the British Governor-General appointed from London, and with the British Parliament as the ultimate authority. So that even if Indianisation were carried to its logical extreme and the Viceroy himself was an Indian, the final authority still would not reside in Delhi, but in London.

So long as this conception is not wholly abolished, there will never be peace in India. The Indian people demand, and must surely obtain sooner rather than later, full national sovereignty exercised in Delhi just as much—and *perhaps* no more—as the people of South Africa exercise full sovereignty at Pretoria.

The basic false assumption by Western democrats looking for their opposite numbers in India is that somewhere there must exist a progressive People's party with whom they can do business. Alas, the tragedy is that the men and women who might form such a party are broken up and scattered far and wide in many different organisations. If India had a strong Communist party we would know where we stood. Had she Labourites or Social-Democrats, we'd know where we stood. But Mn. Roy, who takes the unorthodox Communist line, is distrusted as being too pro-British over his attitude to the war. But the pattern of politics in India has nothing in common with the West. India is not now a democracy and it is by no means certain that she urgently wants to be one in the future. Religion absorbs the small surplus

energies of a chronically ill-nourished people to the exclusion of almost all else. Religion and sex and the struggle for bare survival. Socialism as the rest of the world knows it has so far struggled in vain against Caste and religion. Political doctrines which sway millions in China are scarce heard of here. The whole communist party, they say, could conveniently travel in one Bombay street-car.

Liberals and Progressives of all hues are certainly to be found in the Congress, in the Moslem League too, but it is Gandhi, not Nehru, who dominates Congress to-day. Gandhi with his non-political approach, his Young Men's Hindu Association mentality. Besides containing many intellectuals and idealists, Congress gives houseroom to as strange a band of religious obscurantists, Tolstoy-like masochists, Trotskyites, grass-eaters, anti-Humanists, Moslem-haters, quacks and political sword-swallowers as were ever assembled in a California crank convention.

Is Congress a Bolshevik party, ready and ripe for power? Far otherwise. Its political development seems to me pre-Menshevik, pre-Kerensky—and to have reached about the stage of Prince Lvov.

As the Nazis needed the Jews, so Congress has come to need the British, the ever-convenient whipping-boy on whom all errors, all failures of policy can be laid. If we did not exist, Congress would have had to invent us. And memories are elephantine in this country, as in Ireland. If in 1994 there should be a famine in Sind or a cyclone in Bengal, you can almost hear the Congress-man of that day saying, "What can you *expect* of a country which only fifty years ago was under the British tyranny?"

But to point out the defects of the Congress is not to excuse the British. Congress has shown itself to be a faulty political instrument, yet India is entitled to say of it, "A poor thing, but mine own." And for every blunder made by Congress, you can count on the creaking governmental machine in Delhi—staffed so largely by men of second-rate ability—making another to match. There are many British Die-hards still in India and, since the failure of the Cripps Mission, Congress has been playing the Die-hards' game.



"That dreadful Cripps Mission!" a British Commissioner tells me—"it ought never to have come."

And now Congressites are saying substantially the same thing. Sneering references are made to the man who genuinely tried to implement the majority will of all the United Nations that India should win freedom. If ever times were favourable for a final settlement in India it is when a progressive Britain and Rooseveltian America are allied with New China and the U.S.S.R. But now between the Die-hards on both sides, the men of goodwill in the middle who want to redress old wrongs, close ranks and get on with the war are, for the time being, inarticulate.

However, to some extent the dynamic of war is taking charge.

India and China are two of the vast elementals of mankind in which political niceties, important though they may seem on the surface, are really secondary to the main task of building barriers against famine, drought, disease and the violence of nature. The average expectation of life in India is only 24, against 55 years in England and Wales. Whoever rules in Delhi when the Japanese threat has been thrown back, the all-absorbing task for the next century will still be the same—to raise the economic level of the Indian masses in such a fashion that the political freedom which they are going to receive will not be a mere mockery.

And here the Japanese are helping. Thanks to them, factories are working overtime, industrialisation grows apace and the Indian Air Force advertises: "Wanted—Men who can Plan and Command. Nationality Indian, or Anglo-Indian," and offers wages and a way of life profoundly glamorous to young India. The war is opening up careers and opportunities never known in peace and, even if the political stalemate continues, with elected governments functioning in only five provinces out of eleven, India will come out of the war far stronger industrially and more independent economically than she entered it.

*January 9th, 1943.*—To-day I saw the India of the travel posters. Rajsang, Gwaliss and the Taj Mahal. The colours of these posters are not exaggerated; they are, if anything, insufficiently bright.

The flying-boat took off from Karachi harbour before dawn

and headed for Gwalior. There is something disturbing about flying in pitch darkness—like motoring through the black-out at sixty miles an hour. One might be flying upside down. There is not a star in the sky. You wonder how on earth the pilot can know where he is going.

Dawn breaks over the deserts of Rajputana. The landscape is sere and brown. We are flying low, so that you can look right into the villages—the peasants look up and wave, the cattle run affrighted down the mud streets as the shadow of the big boat passes over them ; the sun is rising, the dung fires glow out all over the plain and the night mists roll away. The villages are like fortresses, ringed around with walls, set down like draughts across a great checkerboard.

When the sun is high, we come down on the lake at Rajsang. At first I think this must be Udaipur and its famous lake palace, but I am told that this is almost the double of Udaipur, which is built around a similar lake forty miles away. Rajsang, is in fact, the aerial junction for Udaipur.

They call this lake a “ tank ”—ugly, inoperative word !—and it is just big enough to land a flying-boat on. Bare red hills surround it on all sides and around the water is built a high wall of so spotless a white it looks like marble ; on one side are plantations of formal trees, on another a white shrine erected on a terrace rising high above the lake. We disembark while the boat is refuelling and climb up scores of steps on to the terrace on top of which there is a little teahouse, so chastely put together that it, too, might be dedicated to a god.

These glistening walls and white terraces make the place a little piece of Greece in the midst of an Indian desert. We are all silent in admiration. A bell begins to toll a thin note on the far side of the lake. The Airways servants in their white turbans and white gloves begin to serve tea. In white cups, naturally.

The brigadier without any medals, who taps his foot there impatiently, seems to have been forgotten by the boys.

“ Boy ! Boy ! ” he bellows, “ where in hell’s name is my tea ? ”

His angry voice echoes round the cloister and through the marble courts ; its vibration sends the startled doves wheeling up from their cote and out over the blue water.

The brigadier's outraged gaze, concentrated upon the tea samovar, ignores Rajsang entirely. Perhaps he has seen it all before?

I cannot see it enough. Wandering down the terrace, I am almost left behind when somebody toots upon a horn to signify that the launch is taking off again to where the flying-boat lies moored, a fat seagull upon the water's bosom.

If all India is like this, I am going to enjoy it extremely. But my voice of pre-experience, my old Anglo-Indian sub-conscious, tells me that this is just like the travel posters at home in that, presently, we are going to walk round behind the cathedral and come upon the municipal gasworks hiding there. And so it is, figuratively speaking. For as soon as the aircraft leaves Rajsang behind, we fly over waste and ugliness again and this goes on for several hundred miles.

The Gwalior landing-place is another 'tank'; but a mere reservoir, without charm. There is a vague attempt to remind us that we are now leaving British India and entering the domains of His Highness the Maharajah Scindia, inasmuch as an official in state uniform makes us fill up a form not unlike an immigration document. However, this is just 'prestige.' There is no customs examination and the Airways men tell the Gwaliorian to hurry up and not keep the passengers waiting.

We enter a line of station wagons and drive thirty miles into Gwalior city. The country is far more wooded than I had ever supposed Central India could be; in fact, it has an almost European look. But when we reach the city, there is no doubting in which continent we are. The naked children crawling in the dust, the open booths facing the narrow street with the shopmen sitting crosslegged behind their wares, the oxen wandering at will, the women in violent-hued sarees with gold ornaments embedded in their noses, the skinny-shanked men with their cotton 'dhoties' girt around their loins like rickety children wearing an outsize in diapers—this is the India we have a right to expect. And in dirt, flies, smells and general dilapidation it does not let us down.

The theory that gipsies came originally from Hindustan seems very plausible when one looks at these lean brown people and at the romanesque confusion in which they live. Nothing in

these streets seems to be permanent ; the inhabitants give the air of being merely encamped here for the night with their beds thrust out on the pavement, their washing drying across windows and dogs and fowls circulating through every threshold.

Presently this confusion gives place to a broad street and a town hall modelled on Lancashire civil enterprise, *circa* 1840. We are approaching the Maharajah's palace. A traffic 'round-about' has an equestrian statue of the late ruler set down in its centre : the old Rajah bestrides a charger, his sword brandished aloft and on the pedestal is engraved :

"Every Inch a King"

*Shakespeare.*

It seems odd that the rhodomontade of Shakespeare's Chronicles should so appeal to a Hindu prince that he should liken his dead father to an English mediæval king. But perhaps that is precisely what the prince of a 'first-class' Indian State does most resemble—shorn of political power yet wielding economic dominion such as no English king has equalled since Charles the First. And here is another strange parallel. Before the palace the guards' rich purple uniform is set off with a hat of saffron yellow, turned boldly off the face, for all the world like the bluff headgear Henry the Eighth was wearing when Holbein painted him.

Modern India seems to want few or none of our English institutions. Can we take an effete pride in the fact that our Tudor kings still provide inspiration for the Princes of India ?

I must say the palace is delightful—tall and white, all windows and meaningless scrolls and barley-sugar columns piled one atop the other, with a Buckingham Palace kind of courtyard guarded by tons of wrought-iron rails and a great wall around the whole enclosing a park several miles square where, we are told, every kind of animal roams and scores of racehorses are stabled. The Maharajah of Gwalior is the winning owner on the Indian turf this season and possesses some of the finest horseflesh in the country.

A little to the east of the palace the historic Gwalior Fort (after that of Agra, the finest castle in India) crowns a sort of Capitoline hill above the railway station with the same incon-

gruity as Shrewsbury Castle looks down on a tangle of railroad tracks where pleasaunce and tilt-yard once lay.

I feel like a globe-trotter of the good-old, bad-old days as I press on towards Agra and the Taj Mahal. How wicked it seems to take time out from the war, even to see one of the wonders of the world ! After luncheon in the Gwalior Hotel, which again faintly suggests beetles in the soup and cobras beneath the bathtub, most of the aeroplane passengers want to get to Delhi by the afternoon train, but I fall in with a London commercial traveller who knows the Taj well and with a New Zealand wing commander bound for Simla who is as determined as I not to let this chance slip by, so we three resolve to drop off the train in Agra at dusk, rush up to see the Taj Mahal in twilight or by the moon, and go on to Delhi by the midnight train, which gets one there only some six hours after the more dutiful travellers who are going straight through.

We rumble across flat, dried-up pasturelands for four hours. The only one of us in the carriage who seems entirely at home in his surroundings is a fat major of the railway administration—by his accent, an Anglo-Indian, who keeps having tea brought to him by an obsequious 'bearer' who travels in a sort of cubby-hole next to our first-class carriage. Very conscious of his white man's burden, the major treats his servant much worse than I would have ventured to do, and tells us instances of the extreme degeneracy and incompetence of the Indian. I cannot help thinking it strange that he should be so ready to abuse his own father's people, or perhaps his mother's ? The day on which we British quit India will be a day of disaster, he assures us ; the country will just crumple up into anarchy.

"Personally, I am not a quitter," he adds. "I shall not go home, whatever happens, I shall stay here at my post."

He gives a little snort of self-satisfaction.

The poor fellow, I reflect, is over-compensating himself for the fact that 'home' for him spells Allahabad and that he has never seen the British Isles. And no doubt in times of peace, before he wore that uniform, they would not let him into some of their white men's clubs, while the Indians whom he so despises, naturally would not have him in *theirs*, so he has been living out his

life in a vacuum. And yet he is proud of India. To him it's a "white man's country," embellished by the labour and culture of the white man.

Looking out of the train window, I find it hard to agree with him. What I have seen of India so far has given me a profound sense of guilt and discomfort. To think that we should have been here all these years and yet made so little impression on the filth, ignorance and poverty of the place ! I have been in Canada and South Africa : how savage would have been the outcry if we had done as little in those countries as we have done here ! The splendid city of Johannesburg is barely fifty years old : is there anything in all India to compare with Johannesburg after 150 years of British occupation on a comprehensive scale ? The splendid embryo civilisation of New Zealand has been perfected in less time than that : but there, of course, the indigenous race was cultivated and adaptable and one could marry a Maori girl without producing this caricature of a Victorian paterfamilias with a Chichi accent who sits opposite me. The Anglo-Indian seems to be a farcically defective blend—unlike the union of Britons and Burmese or Britons and Chinese girls. Obviously no solution of the Indian problem is possible along *those* lines. And you understand at once the extreme disapproval good-class Indians have always vented on the idea of mixed marriage when you look at some of the disastrous by-blows—the women pretty, one agrees, and there is even the exception of one celebrated film actress to prove the rule that they are not usually intelligent ; but the men poor physical specimens with the mildness of the Hindu coupled to the pomposity of a certain type of Englishman to make a most unattractive rotation of timidity and bluster.

It is a relief to get out of the train at Agra, into a milling crowd of American airmen and girls lined up to bid them good-bye, and to pile into a Tonga which proceeds to race out of the station yard in an effort to get us to the Taj before darkness falls.

As I stand in the gateway and regard this superb object for the first time my mind (as is the way of human minds) is toying with the barely relevant and yet, since it is I who look upon the Taj Mahal, and not Herr Baedeker, I feel justified in asking the reader

to look through my spectacles, smeared over with dust and old fingerprints though they may be.

I listen very carefully to what my two companions will have to say about the Taj Mahal. For me it has become, in a sort, a test of principles. I don't know what my friend Darcy Braddell, author of that excellent architectural treatise *How to Look at Buildings* would think of this. But to my mind a nice appreciation of the Taj Mahal is as reliable a gauge of personality as any I know.

My companions maintain an appreciative silence. Their first remarks, quite rightly, are directed towards the garden which, laid out with the geometrical precision of a fine-cut diamond, reflects beauty from every angle. If the Taj itself were nothing but a ruin, its garden would still be worth a visit. But the Taj is anything but a ruin. It wears its three hundred years so well that it might have been completed yesterday and here, for the first time in my experience, one is able to appreciate an ancient building not in its senescence and decay as one is obliged to appreciate Notre Dame, for example, or Warwick Castle, but fresh and clean, as its builder meant it to be appreciated. How effectively does this spectacle dispose of that gross snobbery of the West which holds that a work of art becomes finer the more it becomes chipped and battered with age !

At the moment the dome has a scaffolding around it which looks like some very ineffectual precaution against air attack. But, we are told, the explanation is more typically Indian than that. It seems that a couple of years ago fears were entertained for the security of the dome, and with great difficulty the scaffolding was erected around the slippery marble rotundity. But when the experts got up there they found that, after all, the Taj was as sound as a bell. No repairs were needed. But the scaffolding remains.

"Government has other matters on hand, so cannot attend," says our guide. The speaker is one of the strange race of acolytes who tend the Taj. They are small, boyish people, rather Mongol in appearance, and they all appear to be related. Their patter is more lucid than that of most guides, nor do they recite at such a murderous pace.

Darkness is coming down as we enter the main chamber. There are no other sightseers. Lighting a taper, the guide goes off into a corner by himself and utters a queer cat-call, to show us how resonant is the echo under the dome. The marble screen around the catafalque looks to me more harmonious than the gold and precious-stone screen which, the guide tells us, preceded it before looters stole the gems away. Hewn out of solid pieces of marble, the tracery is the most complicated I have ever seen and, in its milk-white simplicity, allies the grace of lace with the strength of architecture.

All around the inner walls is a design of flowers and leaves—nothing florid, nothing ‘Oriental’ about this, but all conceived in the greatest purity of line. The flowers are formed of inlays of jade and agate and amethyst and lapis lazuli; the work is so fine that when you pass your finger over it you feel no edge or indentation. The inlay is as smooth as though it had been painted on.

The river which runs behind the Taj is low and muddy, and across the fields in the distance you can see a smoking factory and a puffing train. But to the left the river curves away towards the great red stone mass of Agra Fort and to the Emperor’s window from which Shah Jehan could look out and see his Taj in the building. His whole scheme was never completed: there was to have been another Taj on the opposite bank of the stream, a Taj of black marble, and the two shrines were to be linked by a marble bridge. Yet, as it is, the Taj is complete in itself and, with its gardens behind it and its terrace facing the river and the two small mosques to left and right, there is no need for any embellishment of its surroundings.

Down in the basement, where the real tomb is said to be (that on the main floor being but a dummy), we encounter the kind of abracadabra which some master-mind (one wonders *whose*?) must think is pleasing to the tourist, but which actually exasperates ninety-nine out of a hundred. Three men with Ali-Baba beards are grouped around the sarcophagus on which is laid some currency notes of high denomination (ground-bait to catch tourist-fish!). The bearded ones thrust flowers into our button-holes and ask us to hold out our hands, into which they presently



pour scented dust which they cross with their fingers, muttering some fortune-telling nonsense the while. Then they stand back smiling, waiting for the tip.

I hand back the flower with thanks, pour back the dust into a bowl and turn away without giving them anything. My companions do likewise. We are followed out of the chamber by cries of "Sahib! *Sahib!*" with an intonation which plainly says: "*Really*, what unappreciative barbarians you white devils are!"

It seems a pity that these rascals are permitted to do their Coney Island tricks in such surroundings. But nothing can dim the grandeur of this place for long. A whole holiday crowd, with its sandwiches and bottles of soda-pop and scattered newspapers could be let loose in here without seriously affecting the atmosphere. For the Taj is not so much a building as an essay in pure mathematics. No human presence is needed to embellish it: and equally no human excrescence can diminish it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### A MOGHUL INTERLUDE

INDIANS take their travel seriously. They are in the habit of getting to the railway station hours before the train is due and camping on the platform till it arrives. There is no particular logic in this since it is not a question of "first come, first served": there is no 'queue,' and when the train does come, the last arrival may get a seat in the carriage before a family which has been squatting on the platform all day, eating its meals there and bathing its children under the pump used to water the locomotives.

When we got to Agra station at midnight we were told the train was an hour late. Then, half an hour later, that it was two hours late. This meant little to the majority of the passengers who had been encamped there since the previous afternoon, but to me—used to the minor rigours of the Western Desert, where at least you have always your bed with you and can doss down to while a waiting hour away—the prospect of spending the night on the platform was not appealing. And a full night it turned out to be: the midnight train did not steam in until six o'clock in the morning.

Meanwhile, any number of trains seemed to be going the other way—southward to Bombay and Madras. The third-class carriages, brilliantly illuminated, looked like exotic birdcages—their occupants clad in every kind of bright-hued robe, squeezed together like chickens in a coop, some sleeping one above the other in three tiers, others smoking, others brewing tea, others reading the newspaper and nearly all chattering like starlings, in a dozen different tongues. The noise and the discomfort seemed to worry them not a bit. They all seemed happy and vivacious. At small cost, and in large family groups they were travelling, they were on their way. And the Indian loves to travel.

But the languor of the night spent seated on one's baggage on the railway platform, the repeated questioning, "When is the

Delhi train due?" and the inevitable answer, "Not long now, Sahib—perhaps another hour": the languor and the tergiversation give me the powerful impression that this is not India I have come to, not India at all, but the old Russia we encounter in the plays of Tchekhov, the Russia in which people sat all night on the station platform waiting for trains to Moscow, trains which never came. And I begin to wonder whether the Indian peasant and the old Russian peasant had not something in common and, if so, whether the old Tory fear that Soviet Russia would one day come down and "do something" about India was not based on something deeper than Imperialist jealousies—on a rare shaft of real psychological insight, in fact.

And I am supported in these drowsy musings by the light which the station lantern throws on an editorial in the *Statesman* of Calcutta which asks whether the Anglo-Russian partnership after the war for which the British man in the street warmly hopes, "would be compatible with the existing and in some ways plainly unsatisfactory form of the Empire"? The editorial answers: "We think not," and goes on to suggest that good might come out of inviting the advice upon Indian affairs of "the two great federal powers, the United States and the U.S.S.R., of which the U.S.S.R. has had peculiar experience and success in wielding rapidly into a single system a multitude of diverse nationalities."

There are scarcely any Soviet citizens now in India and those few, I'm told, preserve the most correct reticence on Indian matters. As for the Soviet government, it seems highly unlikely that for many years to come at least it would have either the energy or the inclination to take a direct hand in India. Why, then not invite Soviet aid in an advisory capacity? Moscow has little use for Gandhi or Vallabhai Patel and the reactionary Big Business part of Congress and none whatever for Bose, the traitor Congressman in Berlin. Moscow's inclination is towards Nehru, as is Cripps'; towards the Left Wingers, who are anti-Fascist and potentially the militant allies of the United Nations. In fact, a progressive government in London ought to find itself on the same side of the fence as the Kremlin, when it comes to Indian affairs.

Not so, necessarily, with the Americans. Congress newspapers in India never lack material from America to give the impression

that Washington is actively intervening in Indian politics, which actually is not the case. Every American soldier who lands in India, however, is a born interventionist, and American officers and newspapermen receive the most flattering attention from Congressites to reinforce their natural inclination towards the "downtrodden Indian," whom—whether they read the Hearst Press or the 'progressive' weeklies—they are schooled to regard as a victim of British Imperialism. Some of them—particularly the soldiers—come to modify their views, I am told, or at least to realise that the Indian problem is not coloured in simple black and white, as the papers back home made them believe, but bears that distinctive, wishy-washy Indian grey. Some of them are of Henry Luce's "Neo-Imperialists" and like to think of getting a fair slice of the Indian market after the war, or even a measure of political control under the guise of "disinterested help for the underdog."

The Congress line with Americans is beautifully simple.

"Your Continental Congress won freedom from the British Imperialists," they say. "Won't you help India's National Congress to do the same?"

One would suppose that an attempt to compare the Tory mystic Gandhi, the semi-Fascist Vallabhai Patel or even the idealist Nehru with Washington, Franklin or Jefferson or to suggest that any parallel is possible between the revolt of thirteen highly democratic colonies against the aristocratic oligarchy of 1776 and the effort of some 400 Hindu intellectuals to detach 400 million Asiatics, 88 per cent illiterate and painfully riven by caste and religious difficulties from the influence of a renascent Britain, could deceive only those who had just stepped off the boat. But not necessarily so.

From my contact with Roosevelt's ambassador on the flying-boat I would say that William Phillips is here to initiate no new policy, merely to hold a watching brief. But that does not prevent the newspapers from printing a long letter on behalf of a group of Nationalist Parsees appealing for Phillips's intervention and phrased as though these wealthy business men were downtrodden colonials and Phillips a crusading Lafayette, come to place his sword at the disposal of the Jeejeebhoyas and the Arsiwallas.

This is, of course, sheer Jabberwock. And if Washington were formally a consultant on Indian affairs she would be able to expose it as such. So too, Moscow could demonstrate to India that the war against Fascism is *not* "an Imperialist war."

Here comes the Delhi express at last. We tumble into the first compartment, in which four officers are already asleep in bunks, with two more lying on the floor. Just before noon, we steam past the towers and cupolas of Messrs. Lutyens and Baker's Imperial splendours, past vistas reminiscent of Washington, but even bigger, and into Old Delhi Station.

Of course there is not a room to be had in the town, but I had not expected one, and feel lucky to get a tent and a tin bath in the garden of the Cecil Hotel.

The first shock is that the Imperial Secretariat, where almost the whole war effort is housed under two enormous roofs, is seven miles away and the rare taxi charges sixteen shillings to go there and back. I shall need to go there twice a day—32 bob daily for taxis alone! The next shock is that the Burrah Sahib is no longer getting his burrah peg but has fallen back upon Indian-made rum or gin, the bottle of whisky costing £3 18s., and the supply fast running out. Pretty soon not a single glass of whisky will be drunk from one end of India to another. More testimony to the twilight of the British Raj? . . . A severe blow, at any rate, to a standard resource of the British music hall comedian.

I mean to stay in Delhi only long enough to make my arrangements for going to the front in Burma. Brigadier Jehu, the well-named Director of Public Relations under Wavell (for he is a furious driver through military obstacles) advises me not to go to Arakan but to try the northern front, the base for which is the native state of Manipur, adjoining Assam. A lot of people, I find, don't like Jehu: he is certainly something of an *arriviste*.

From the fact of his previous residence at Juhu, near Bombay, I suggested that he might take as his post-war title, Baron Jehu of Juhu. The brigadier, however, did not find this at all amusing, and our relations thereafter could not be termed more than 'correct.' However, he was entirely right in advising me to go

north, not south, as events proved. For that I must record my gratitude.

One of the first *curiosa* of Delhi is the spectacle of Indian A.T.S. girls going around in Sarees. If only the A.T.S. in India could be organised on a wider basis, it might have an important effect in breaking down caste restrictions among women.

The wife of my friend Colonel Desmond Young, who was taken prisoner in the Western Desert, took me to a big A.T.S. parade on the greensward below the old city walls built by the Moghul Emperors, who would turn in their graves could they have seen this spectacle of emancipation.

The Begum Shah Nawaz, member of the Defence Council, took the salute in a purple and gold saree and thousands of Indian women, some in sarees and many in complete 'purdah' were there to watch their emancipated sisters march past. Girls representing every community in India—Hindus, Parsees, Sikhs, Anglo-Burmese, Anglo-Indian and English paraded in khaki drill uniforms similar to the tropical kit worn by the English A.T.S. Those forbidden by religion to wear skirts, marched in a silken saree worn under the regulation uniform tunic. No men were admitted to the parade ground except the bandsmen and the sergeants who had drilled the girls.

At the gate an indignant young Hindu stopped me and said, "All my womenfolk are in there and they won't let me in—it's an outrage!"

I explained that I was entering only to report the proceedings whereupon he retorted, "There are a bunch of Holy Men in there—why should they be allowed a view?"

Sure enough, there were about a dozen Fakirs within the grounds, long resident there and undisturbed by the authorities. Their emaciated bodies covered in ashes and their long hair and wild appearance contrasted forcibly with the thousand of women in uniform or holiday clothes. Modern India, and this India of Masculine Mumbo-Jumbo, you felt, cannot long exist side by side.

Some of the Fakirs prayed, others lay stretched in uncomfortable attitudes as though on the rack, one had pins stuck through his feet: none paid any attention to the parade of modern womanhood.

Hundreds of women present were wearing the "Burkha," the white Purdah garment which completely covers the head and body, leaving only a small latticework slit before the eyes, but they threw back these cumbersome garments to see the show. The majority of women weren't veiled. College girls, laughing and chattering in their bright sarees, climbed on top of American tanks and hundreds of little girls, from the naked daughters of Untouchables to the brocade-clad children of wealthy Zamindars (landowners), ran excitedly after the marching columns as the girl soldiers swung on to parade under a brassy sky, in a temperature of 100 in the shade, to the tune of "Colonel Bogey."

Mrs. Young tells me that recently when the Vicereine attended a similar all-feminine occasion it came on to rain and her A.D.C. forgetting Purdah restrictions, ran into the gardens carrying her umbrella. For a moment there was panic among the women until one lady called out : "Don't be alarmed, sisters : it is only Her Excellency's Eunuch !"

Mrs. Young, who commands a platoon of the Women's Army, is proud of the fact that in India, "which, God knows, is not a democratic country," they have really enforced some democracy in the women's units. Every woman must start in the ranks. The starting wage is five pounds a month with all found. Girls enlist to serve anywhere in India, or alternately for local service only, in which case they can live at home. Pay is exactly the same in either case. The girls serve in every military cantonment in India, from Quetta to Shillong, from Peshawar to Vizagapatam. They have no dietary problems, the different religions eating each others' types of food with the exception that the Hindu girls do not eat beef.

That there are no prudish restrictions about make-up I can see. The Anglo-Burmese girls, who formed the nucleus of the corps after evacuation from Burma, are very chic in silk stockings and they wear eye-black as well as rouge.

To see these thousands of secluded women applauding their emancipated sisters gives one some idea of how the Indian cauldron would simmer once the appallingly weighty lid of religious restriction was removed.

New Delhi, having been built for the automobile age, with avenues miles long and buildings spaced widely apart, takes badly to the war-time bicycle and pony-trap. And nobody suffers from this more than the American soldiers, whom one sees cycling to and fro in droves, much like the cycling clubs on English roads before the war.

There are a very considerable number of Americans in Delhi, mostly airmen and technicians, and more keep coming all the time. They have taken over the best hotel, the Imperial, and, as usual, have much more money to spend than the English troops. But it is not just that which makes relations rather difficult between them. It is that thousands of Americans who have never been abroad before are meeting Englishmen for the first time in surroundings in which the English are not at their best. The American, too, is not at his best in India; he is not at all sure how to treat the Indian, varying between back-slapping and a camaraderie which the Indian finds rather embarrassing and a repressive attitude more marked than the Indian has noted in British troops these many years. It is a great pity that the American has come here direct, without seeing England on the way, for he is obliged to judge the Englishman by his work in India and which of us is so complacent about that that he would wish our people to be judged by their Indian record alone? But that is how it works out.

Again, Delhi is a long way from the front line and most of the troops there, British and American, have never seen any fighting, nor are likely to. That is not their fault: a large part of any modern army is destined not to fight. But the fact remains that fighting is an excellent cement to put between Allied soldiers: in North Africa, Britons and Americans got on well together because they were fighting and dying side by side. Here in Delhi many of them are dying of boredom in their leisure hours and, instead of fighting side by side, well . . . there is no outlet for their fighting spirit.

The Americans run true to form in being tremendous sightseers, and in a day and a bit of running round with some of them, I dare say I saw more of Delhi than the peace-time tourist sees in a week.



From the top of the Qutab Minar, the red sandstone monument 200 feet high with Koranic inscriptions for decoration all the way up, you realise that this so-called "New" Delhi is only the seventh or eighth in a line of Delhis, each built by a new conqueror or dynasty and each considered, in its time, the final word in imperial capitals. City grew upon city in this featureless plain by the Jumna River, the ruins of the old still standing by the side of the new. In this succession the Viceroy's palace and the huge circular council house appear anything but the last word: Lutyen's city is, of course, incomplete; and looking at the ruins all around, you wonder if it ever will be completed, and you appreciate the *mot* of Georges Clemenceau who, when asked what he thought of the English architect's city, observed, "It will make the finest ruin of them all."

Between the Qutab Minar and the Imperial Secretariat lies the new airport, and as I stood atop the column, with a great red navigation light flashing over my head, I understand why aircraft leaving the flying field flew straight over the column—an aircraft beacon bequeathed us by the Moghul Emperors!

At the foot of the Qutab is the Iron Pillar of the Hindu king, Chandra Gupta II, who conquered Bengal—a solid piece of metal as smooth as marble and of so great a weight that it seems incredible that the king should have found the means to haul it erect and plant it firmly in the ground. A mile or two to the east lies another ruined city—two mediæval keeps, one of great size, with a stone causeway linking the two and reminiscent, with its battlements and turrets rising out of the rolling wheatfields, of Carcassonne.

Then, on the fringe of modern Delhi itself, you have the tomb of the Emperor Humayun, a Taj Mahal of red stone in exquisite gardens but without the simple purity of the Taj itself. This tomb boasts a line of those little Moghul cupolas which we see imitated in the Pavilion at Brighton; they spoil the line of the roof, to my mind, introducing a fussy note which makes one complain, "H'm . . . too Oriental." The Taj is *not* specifically Eastern, in this sense. One can imagine it triumphing just the same on the banks of the Potomac, or even the Thames.

At the eastern end of the triumphal way which cuts across New

Delhi lies another ancient fort with a magnificent Moghul gateway, through which we rolled, only to be stopped short by a bayonet and asked for our papers by a Sikh sentry. Mystified, because the place had all the air of being a protected monument, we looked around to see why we were being debarred. Heads began popping out of the windows—yellow heads, wearing horn-rimmed spectacles. Then we understood. This was a place of detention for Japanese internees !

The Kotlah Firoze Shah, or fortress of King Firoze, reminded me strongly of a mediæval bastion in England. Lawns and flower-beds have grown up around the ruins, which now have something of the forlorn air of Pevensey. Indeed, there cannot have been much difference between the fortified dwelling of an Oriental king and that of a European ruler in mediæval times, for the art of war was then developed about equally, as between West and East, if indeed the East, whence came the use of gunpowder, did not have a prior advantage on that account.

The glory of Delhi is, of course, the Fort, which was at once the palace, the garrison town, the administrative headquarters and the treasure house of the Moghul emperors. That evil genius of architecture—the British Indian engineer, who is responsible for so many monstrosities throughout the East from Teheran to Rangoon, has done his best as though in revenge for the Mutiny, to ruin the imperial palace by erecting towering brick barracks adjoining it. These dwarf the elegant Moghul buildings and would completely ruin the site were it not that later generations have done something to repair the damage by planting trees in front of the troops' quarters. In summer time, the worst of their yellow brick and iron railings is, mercifully, hidden.

The Fort is a township in itself penned within a great wall of the prevailing red sandstone, interspersed with towers and cupolas in the Moghul style. It is still a British military centre, as the air-raid shelters dug in its barrack squares and the wireless masts towering over its battlements show. The Union Jack fluttering from the central tower and the shops of the garrison tailors and bootmakers in the bazaar inside the gate give the whole the air of an unspoiled period piece—pure A. E. W. Mason. One half-expects to see a troop of Lancers ride out with sun-guards hanging

down behind their topees. But all that emerges is an American officer in a Jeep, evidently paying a social call. . . .

The palace itself is not a palace, *proprement dit*, but rather a series of pavilions in a Persian garden, all inter-connected. And the garden is made for living in.

How much pleasanter in their mode of living were these Mongol emperors who chose small marble pavilions of exquisite workmanship and taste, than the vulgar *Roi Soleil* who required thousands of square yards of mirrors and gilded chambers to house his magnificence. And in Versailles, clean water and baths are notable absentees and the *chaise percée* is king ; whereas in Delhi the emperors bathed in one marble chamber, enjoyed a scent-bath in another and what we now call a Turkish bath in a third, while in its marble bed the "River of Life," a pure stream, runs through the palace grounds and across the rooms and courts themselves, cooling them in the hot weather and, by night, affording the delight of variegated colours by means of changing lights concealed behind the translucent marble aqueduct.

Through this stream, we are told, swam rare ornamental fish with gold and precious stones ringed through their noses, so as to catch the sun's sparkle by day or the moon's glow by night.

The emperors lived largely out of doors : most of the pavilions had velvets or embroideries hung between their pillars for walls. In winter, central heating was supplied through pipes. The emperors abandoned Delhi in the extreme summer heat for Kashmir, moving their whole court thither in an enormous train. Yet if detained in the fort through pressure of business, they can rarely have spent an uncomfortable moment ; their "air-conditioning" has the air of efficiency.

The main pavilion is the Diwan-i-'Am, or council hall, its flat roof supported by 60 pillars of red stone. Shah Jehan, its builder, sat on a plain marble dais only two feet high, while his subjects sat upon the carpeted floor. The hall is open to the elements.

The Diwan-i-Khas, or private audience chamber, of white marble entire, is encrusted with lapis lazuli and red and purple porphyry. Here stood the peacock throne with its back-piece of two peacocks with tails outspread, their feathers simulated in

inlaid sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pearls. The plain marble base on which the throne once stood is all that reminds us of it to-day. But I greatly doubt that the so-called peacock throne which stands in the Gulestan Palace in Teheran, which the proud Iranians tell you was taken there from Delhi by the conqueror Nadir Shah, is in fact the peacock throne at all ; in any event, the Teheran throne has been despoiled of its precious stones to the point where only the skeleton of the original throne remains.

The emperors' private apartments are charming (though one wishes Lord Curzon's restoring hand had been a thought less lavish with the gold paint). The essence of these apartments is not the costliness of their embellishment but the overall simplicity of their line. They are essentially *private* apartments, rooms to be lived in, and although the inlaid and chased marble forms a magnificent background, there are no *excrescences* ; the design rests the eye, does not excite it.

There is a waterfall devised so that the stream may come tumbling right through the pavilions.

There is a window made of translucent marble so fine that the moonlight shines through the solid stone. There is a rococo balcony projecting over the battlements some fifty feet above the ground from which, we are told, the emperor used to watch his elephants parade very morning. From this balcony, King George V. and Queen Mary made a state appearance during their Coronation Durbar. But when I stood on this imperial rostrum, all I saw were a couple of old men fishing in the Jumna River nearby and a few cows straying over the parched grass below.

If we allow to Versailles the redemptive charm of its Petit Trianon the Delhi Fort still, to my mind, stays one step ahead with its Moti Masjid, its Pearl Mosque built in 1659 by the Emperor Aurangzeb, the most delightful little rococo mosque imaginable—the kind of thing that might have been built, a little later, by Palladio to amuse Horace Walpole.

The Pearl Mosque is made of white and grey marble with three domes in line and a regular forest of little minarets. It was intended for the emperor to worship in alone. And indeed there is space within for only two or three people at a time. We know the temperate attitude towards religion which the Moghuls

acquired and it is perhaps not stretching the parallel too far to set side by side the spectacle of the Great Moghul, bowing thrice in this elegant little pastiche of a mosque, with that of Marie Antoinette, worshipping in her fashion at the shrine of Rousseau's "Reason and the Natural Man," among the scented baa-lambs at the Trianon.

Emperor and queen—both going through the fashionable motions and devotions of their day, in settings beautifully appropriate.

But when you consider the manner of their daily lives, the Asiatic despot, it's plain to see, lived in these lovely gardens with what we should now consider greater elegance, and in better taste, than the Bourbon tyrant in his grey barracks.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### GOING "JUNGLY"

INDIA'S EASTERN COMMAND resembles a giant Gulliver stretched out northward across Bengal and Assam, with his head in the Himalayas, his feet in the great industrial stronghold of Calcutta and, just now, one toe advanced into Burma, stirring up the ant-heap of Japanese Lilliputians in Arakan.

Yes, the fighting on the Mayu Peninsula is strictly a one-toe affair, so far as Gulliver is concerned. But to the Japanese this tickling process is a portent of things to come. There are signs that the Lilliputians, looking towards the day when Gulliver may give them well-directed kicks with both feet or sock them a left and a right with his sturdy fists farther north, are preparing their defences with conspicuous zeal.

A few months back one would have said these signs would have indicated the Japanese were preparing a real onslaught on Bengal but, such is the strength of our forces arrayed against them, although not at the moment engaged that—all complacency of the Singapore variety cast aside—the Lilliputians would need a far larger army than they now possess either in Burma or in Thailand to stand a chance of invading Bengal.

To-day, January, 1943, they are building new aerodromes and perfecting those which we built and lost to them when Burma was evacuated. Fresh Japanese troops have moved into Arakan and others have arrived at Akyab. Defensive preparations are going forward even in Thailand, where arrangements have been completed for the evacuation of Bangkok following the statement by the Jap-dominated Thai premier that Bangkok was likely to be attacked from the air.

We have now a great modern army facing the Japanese. It is not as highly mechanised as it would have to be to fight in Europe or Africa, but its first job, whether in Burma, Thailand, China or Malaya, will be to operate in a country where tanks are more of an

embarrassment than a utility, and where plenty of automatic weapons, good snipers, light portable field artillery and mortars are the things most needed.

The Japs are very good at mortaring and sniping. In front of Donbaik on the Mayu Peninsula they have been putting up a desperate resistance, using mortars as we would use field artillery, for weeks past. The terrain is all in their favour. Farther up the peninsula, we found these emperor-worshippers not ashamed to retreat. On the contrary, they pulled out from positions sometimes earlier than they need have done. But now they evidently have been ordered to give no more ground, and this means they have to be exterminated one by one, since they will not surrender.

The much vaunted 'no surrender' technique of the Japanese soldier has in fact its weak side, for surrender is still considered so disgraceful that so long as a way of retreat remains open they will remove themselves from the battlefield rather than be captured.

On the other hand there is no denying that when perched in trees or hidden in the bush, each man carrying on a one-man war to the death, they are formidable foes.

"How great it would be for Britain and the world if we could have a national government in India even now and a great offensive launched on Japan in Burma just now when the Axis is down and out elsewhere," declares that up and coming politician Mr. Rajagopalachari in a speech in Madras, which winds up with a resounding call for a "victorious march right up to Singapore, where the war as well as the peace could be won."

But it is neither the absence of a nationalist Raj at Delhi nor the cunning of the Japanese snipers in the jungle which limits us at present to the use of only a fraction of our available strength, but the old, old story of supply lines unbelievably exiguous. There is a certain sector where we are in a position to put a strong force into Burma, but that force would have to be supplied over a single footpath barely three-foot wide. Pack animals could barely negotiate it.

Undoubtedly Rajagopalachari's "victorious march" is coming one day. But there are many obstacles which prevent the Indo-Burmese frontier being exploited fully as geography intended—as a springboard from which Japanese-held Asia can be broken

into overland without the necessity for expensive sea-borne operations.

Hence we should not say the "Burma campaign" in talking of the present operations. Campaign is much too big a word, and can only arouse over-sanguine expectations.

Our troops, of course, know this well. They are facing the most difficult period any soldier has to endure, waiting and preparing for a big day which is coming inevitably, but he knows not when. At such times welfare and amenities among the troops are of first-rate importance, and here in Calcutta the United Nations soldier is well looked after.

The hardfaced business 'burra sahibs' of Calcutta, reputed the toughest tycoons in the East, have turned over a new leaf and out of business hours are doing their duty by the fighting men to such purpose that Calcutta is accounted the finest leave town in the Orient with the exception of Bombay.

There are canteens, clubs and plenty of sports. Racing, swimming and cricket. The anti-Fascist Italian Firpo, now naturalised, whose restaurant is famed all over the Orient, has opened a special restaurant for the army and installed some of his best chefs in it.

The Great Eastern Hotel is given over to club rooms and refreshment rooms for the troops, which is the equivalent of opening a canteen in the Savoy. Entering the billard saloon I find the place filled with Chinese officers and diplomats, six tables manned by billiards'-playing Celestials.

Touring cars converted into taxis and driven by bearded Sikhs carry American airmen and men from the English County Regiments rubbernecking around the Empire's second largest city.

I ask a Scots soldier who seems to be having a good time what it is that he likes about the town and, disregarding the elegance of the Chowringhee and the Maidan (Piccadilly and Hyde Park respectively) he replies, "The docks district—it's so hamely and dirty it brings guid old Glasgee to mind."

There is an eighteenth century air about the centre of Calcutta. Palladian terraces built in the time of Wellesley put to shame the late Victorian 'Oriental' style buildings, with straggling balconies and messy façades. The original Calcutta was intended to look like Bath or Cheltenham. And why not? By building



with thick stone and using high ceilings the Georgian architects proved that an Eastern city can be made livable for Europeans without resorting to the 'Veranda-Punkah' style—a bastard form in which the best of both East and West is lost.

From the native state of Manipur, which projects its mountainous mass into Northern Burma along a front of 200 miles, British troops are operating farther to the eastward against the Japanese than anywhere else, despite immense difficulties of climate and supply. Even the Eighth Army in its Libyan campaigns never had to contend with worse conditions. To begin with, it takes days to get anywhere near the front.

Leaving G.H.Q. in Delhi, I spent thirty-six hours in the train covering the 900 miles to Calcutta, then came another 600 miles in two days to Manipur Road, railhead for the state of Manipur, and a further 130 miles over mountains 5000 feet high to the capital, Imphal. And that's only the start. The hardest trek lies ahead over jungle tracks being made into 'jeep roads,' but which for the most part are still incomplete over mountains even higher down into the valley of the Chindwin in Burma, behind which the Japanese positions lie. All told, including stops, it is taking me one week to get from Delhi to the front, seeing an awful lot of India on the way.

We passed north of the Brahmaputra River and within sight of the Himalayas, then ferried across it at Amagon. The mighty stream looks very Chinese here, in keeping with the name of Tsangpo borne by its upper reaches in Tibet: a yellow water-course dotted with islands, with steep forest-covered banks. The coolies sailing ships upon it all wear big straw hats. Their features are Mongolian, too. On the train were a number of women taking their children to school at Shillong, a hill station with an almost English climate. We take the narrow-gauge Assam-Burma railway and travel all day through the foothills of Assam—a series of gorgeous wooded valleys which remind me of North Wales.

We eat well in the midget dining-car as the train puffs around sharp curves, so slowly that you feel you could get out and walk by its side. The young officers going to the front all have gramophones, so the train gives off a perpetual strain of syncopation as

it passes through these wilds. Very sentimental numbers seem to be favourites. Particularly "Tangerine."

We pass a whole trainload of Celestial soldiery, riding down from China. They were probably flown in by the Americans in their transport planes which come back almost empty from Chungking. Some are still in blue quilted uniforms, others are in the latest American equipment which they have been given at the training centres where American officers have been grooming them for battle.

"Cheerio, Tommy! Hallo!" chant the Chinamen, with broad smiles. They are eating their midday meal with chopsticks out of wooden bowls as they roll past but, despite the lurching of the little train, not a mouthful seems to go astray!

At Manipur road we put up at No. 3 Rest Camp—probably the most famous camp in India. Some inspired authority had set it down in the midst of a wood formerly reserved for Phallic worship. In between the tents and Bashas (bamboo huts) stood enormous organs of generation hewn from granite. No expense had been spared in doing a realistic job, both in a concave and convex sense. Inevitably, the place became known as "Penis Park."

We messed in a big bamboo hut, as large as an English manor house—everything was bamboo, walls, floors and ceiling, but surprisingly warm and efficient in keeping out the rain, which poured tropically down all day.

The jungle is not so jungly as I'd expected to find it. Here there is even an attempt to Anglicise it—flowers planted outside the mess, although in the sour, sodden soil they barely survive.

Mosquitoes cause far more casualties than the Japanese, the M.O. of Manipur Road tells me. In deep jungle he reckons 90 per cent of the men will get malaria if they stay there long enough. The Japanese are affected just as seriously as we are: in fact the enemy has deliberately forborne to occupy some bad malaria districts, which have become a no man's land in consequence. But nowadays, the M.O. adds, malarial fever can to a great extent be 'controlled': that's to say, by giving quinine at the right times it is possible to ensure that a man has his fever at a time or place when it's convenient for him to have it, and where he

can be properly looked after. Again, fortunately, near the worst districts there are nearly always healthy hill locations, such as the Naga Hills, where men can be sent to convalesce.

We drove across these hills on the way up to Imphal. They are one of the most beautiful parts of India, with their forest-clad downs and the higher peaks capped in snow. The Manipur Road itself is the famous one down which the refugees evacuated from Burma. Winding at first through deep, steamy ravines where the sun never penetrates, it climbs almost to the snowline. It's a wonderful job—a Burma Road in miniature—and had any one else but ordinary British engineers built it, it would be world-famous for the skill of its construction. It is one long hairpin bend for all of its 130 miles, and covering it in fast convoy tries the toughest nerves, as the Indian drivers, sublimely confident, do brake turns around bends which have a 2000-foot drop into the roaring torrent beneath.

To fit this road, and others like it, to carry an army, tens of thousands of Naga tribesmen have come down from the hills to work for more money than they have ever seen in their lives before. Until very recently head-hunters, the Nagas are charming little people who wear glittering beads and bright loincloths. Although they have abandoned mayhem for road construction, there is still a naughty twinkle in their eye. Some I saw sleeping by the roadside wrapped in blankets imprinted with swastikas, which is of course the symbol of India's ancient Aryan civilisation.

Recently the Nagas asked permission to go hunting Japanese heads in the jungles of northern Burma. But hunting heads is scarcely an efficient form of warfare against well-armed Japs, so the Nagas were baulked in their hope of reverting to head-hunting, as it were, under official auspices. However, they are proving useful at the front as guides and guerrillas. They are a great force behind the fighting troops, with whom they get on well.

Another pleasant thing our men on the Chindwin front have behind them is the pretty little city of Imphal, capital of the Maharajah of Manipur. A few days here makes a real break from the front and prevents that 'jungly feeling' from getting too much of a hold. The first night I was quartered in a typical Imphal bungalow, red-bricked behind its green lawns and flower

beds for all the world like a villa at Woking. In this oasis of electric light, afternoon tea and even a tin-shack movie, troops from the jungle can get respite from the incessant dampness and gloom.

Everything in Imphal looks trim and suburban—everything except the Rajah's palace. The British political agent—golf clubs in his hall, old brogues before the evening fire, bound volumes of *Punch*, reminiscences of Balliol in the Nineties (how like my own father's background in the foreign service of the government of India!)—warned me of the Rajah's poverty. But I had not thought that any magnifico with an eleven-gun salute could really live in such a style. A broad avenue leads up to the 'Palace' which is guarded by sentries of the Manipur State forces, wearing pillbox caps. In the compound a handsome Hindu temple meets the eye; pure white, with two golden domes. But what is this other building—dirty grey, with a tin roof, and with cows straying and nondescript children playing around its back-door? That, sir, is the residence of His Highness the Maharajah. An English country solicitor would be ashamed to live in such a place.

But, it is said, the prince has quite a handsome residence in Shillong, where he prefers to reside.

The homes of the Rajah's subjects, however, are full of character and have a charm of their own. One of the Japanese-speaking British intelligence officers here, known to all as "Mother Brown," lives in a real Manipuri house which, he says, has points of resemblance with the mode of living he was used to in Japan. Brown gave a party there for Emeny of the *Chronicle*, Moore of the *Telegraph* and myself. The house is oblong, with three rooms—an outer veranda room open to the elements on three sides, an inner living-room and a kitchen at the back. The construction is of bamboo and mud and cowdung mixed. Thick bamboo columns support the ceiling and bamboo stiffening of the walls gives a half-timbered effect.

The furniture was all 'built in' with the exception of the bed, which was of finely-carved ebony, very massive.

We were served a Manipuri dinner consisting of a rice curry with a great variety of different beans, and Indian Chapatties (a

sort of pancake) with mincemeat rolled inside them. This was washed down by the local drink, a rice wine called "Zoo." This is rather tasteless, but after a short while is apt to produce zoological reactions in those who try it. Naught but the utmost respectability can be expected of the Nautch girls, however. Like Japanese geishas, they are purely entertainers, and their services are highly valued. This particular evening cost our host some £3. There were two Nautches, one much older than the other, a drummer and a man who played a harmonium. The music was tedious in the extreme, all in a minor key, and the younger Nautch danced as she sang in a piercing nasal tone. Some of her songs were rather naughty: her gestures made that plain, without a word being translated. She sang a rather charming ditty about a bird, called "Pee-oo-Pee-oo Pee-oo": the onomatopæic refrain was repeated endlessly. The girl danced with tiny movements of her hands and feet. The whole effect was of somewhat excessive 'refinement,' all mighty ladylike; but the fate of the little bird was evidently very sad, for when the song ended, a tear stood in the singer's eye. Then she sat down to refresh herself with Zoo whilst the drummer treated us to a drum solo which lasted for twenty minutes.

These Manipuri dancers are highly appreciated in India proper, as far away as Calcutta. To us their art appeared monotonous, but the younger girl, at least, was delicately pretty. Her appearance was somewhere between that of an athletic Cantonese girl and a Hindu maiden. She was a pale *café au lait*. She wore no fewer than sixty-nine silver bracelets. Such girls often become the consorts of Rajahs. One knows of some crowned heads, I must say, who have done a lot worse.

"Wanted—a Long Range Jungle group." This is the slogan under which India's eastern army is trained to match, then master, the Japanese in the vast jungle country which stretches east of Assam towards China, Thailand and Malaya.

As the Long Range Desert Group paved the way for the Eighth Army's victories in Libya by operations far behind the enemy's lines, so men perfected in guerrilla tactics and jungle warfare are essential here. Many already are operating as jungle

raiders. General "Punch" Cowan's 17th Division, for one, are now jungle experts. Thousands are coming in from special training schools for jungle war.

On General Cowan's desk I find a copy of the Indian Army news magazine *Victory*, with a cartoon depicting two Tommies horribly entwined in a bamboo jungle and one saying, "You know there are times when I wonder whether Salsbury Plain was really the best training ground for this type of warfare."

The general tapped this with his finger as he said, "Every man in my command must be a jungle expert and field craftsman, each one—not merely the infantry. I have trained my lads till they grow tails and swing from the trees like monkeys."

The prestige which the Japanese have acquired as jungle virtuosi is largely relative. The Nipponese have no natural ability for this but in the jungly Japanese mandated islands before the war they had secret training grounds, whilst our troops in India understandably concentrated on mountain tactics on the North-West Frontier, in which they led the world.

So to-day our Eastern army is adamant that although one may be a Guardsman or even a highly trained Commando fresh from Britain, one must start again at the beginning when it comes to the jungle. Our troops have to make an absolutely clean break away from all preconceived notions of modern mechanised war.

Forward from here the supply line goes some distance by mules, oxen or jeeps.

But the greater part of the way it goes by foot along narrow paths.

I asked the general how long it would take me to reach a point on the map where he declared one of his patrols was operating. He replied, "Six days on a mule to reach the base from which they start operations. Six days back, allow two days with them and you would have to count on being a fortnight away from here."

Then it would take another five days to get my despatches back to Calcutta from this division. That gives one an idea of the immense difficulties involved. Field-Marshal Wavell recognised war correspondents' problems in this connection when we met him in Imphal by saying that if we experienced delay with our despatches he would take them back to base in his own aeroplane,

which he sportingly did. Probably the first time in war that a field-marshal acted as courier for some newspapermen !

Pink cheeked, agate-eyed "Punch" Cowan has toughened his men until they are veritable Tarzans of the teak forests. From his beautifully concealed headquarters (Bashas built of bamboo upon the clearing ground on which the bamboo itself has been felled) patrols go forth carrying daily rations of only 2 pounds (instead of the customary army ration of four pounds per man), absolutely self-contained, with light automatic weapons.

Every man knows how to camouflage himself and is a good swimmer. Every man. When a colonel the other day went up a river a little way to ford it instead of swimming directly across, a famous brigadier of the tough school took the colonel's equipment, swam across the river himself carrying it on his back, deposited the equipment without comment at the colonel's feet, and walked away.

From this point the other day British troops set out and marched sixty miles within twenty-four hours. Our men work a lot in gym shoes, jocularly known as "Pownalls pumps," after the general who initiated their use. They use dogs trained for jungle work and carry pigeons and special light wirelasses.

As well as any Japanese, they know how to camouflage themselves up a tree without getting out on a limb. The Japanese don't have to travel so light because they can get steamers loaded with supplies for the northern front all the way from Rangoon up to the Chindwin River, though only at night. By day our air force makes river navigation too risky.

In a jungle glade so romantic that one expected Dorothy Lamour to emerge at any moment from a bamboo hut and flash her sarong in a dive into the purling river nearby, I met a man whose personal stories of patrols are such that no scenarist would dare to use them. A young captain with the M.C. said, "I had my platoon hidden in a wood and was prospecting out in front when I saw a number of troops washing themselves by the river. I approached cautiously but was reassured to see faces apparently Chinese. An officer shaving himself called to me in perfect English, 'Are you English officer?'"

"I said yes. Approaching, he asked where my troops were. I

asked how many he had. He replied, 'I have one battalion : How many have you ?' Then, with a shock I'll never forget, I saw a curved Japanese sword lying near him and the Japanese flag against a tree. Stammering I replied, 'I have two battalions.' He grinned and drew in his breath, then I was certain he was a Jap. I turned and bolted back into the jungle. The Jap officer had a revolver, but was evidently too astonished himself to fire. His troops started shouting crazily as I ran and gave chase, but didn't follow up for fear of my men. We knew Chinese were in the neighbourhood. Probably the Japs were after them and never expected to see us."

Burmese tribesmen supporting the British cause have clashed fiercely in many parts of northern Burma with tribesmen aiding the Japanese. It is estimated there have been several thousand casualties in the last few months of 1942 among tribesmen on both sides.

The prospect of having to fight mostly through jungles perhaps all the way to Singapore was one which once gave our commanders nightmares.

But the days when the Japs were masters of jungle war and we were only learners are gone. We had to build here an army utterly different from that required to invade Europe or master the Libyan desert. Naturally, it is taking time, and of an army in India approaching two million there is a vast reservoir still available for training.

But if General Lida Shojiro, the Japanese G.O.C., Burma, had seen what I have seen up here I think he would order his jungle warriors to take a refresher course.

Early in February, 1943, Field-Marshal Wavell went down into Burma through Imphal to see these things for himself. He was accompanied by the commanding general of the Service of Supply, United States Army—Lieut.-General Brehon Somervell. Seated on a river bank inside Burma, the two men discussed the grand strategy of the United Nations in relation to operations on this front and in the light of the Casablanca conference, which Somervell had just attended. Driving into Burma over roads which only a short while earlier had been jungle tracks, Somervell



had a chance to appreciate the formidable difficulties of terrain and supply in this area.

The two chiefs lunched in a Basha off jungle fowl which British officers had just shot. In the course of a musical programme provided by someone's portable gramophone, there rang through the jungle the sugary tones of Bing Crosby singing "On the Road to Mandalay."

I had not met Wavell before, but I had known Auchinleck, and it was interesting to note that there was something of the same diffidence and quietness about each of them. Both men of a completely different stamp to General Montgomery ! I had in my pocket at that moment a letter from General Auchinleck replying to a request of mine that he should grant me an interview which could be reprinted for the information of his old soldiers of the Eighth Army. Writing from the Viceroy's house in Delhi, where he was then in an odd, indeterminate state, on the 'active list' yet without a command (how glad we all were when he was again made Commander-in-Chief in India !) Auchinleck modestly declined to talk on the ground that his views could no longer interest anybody. But he added :

"I naturally continue to take the liveliest interest in the army of the Middle East, and I follow their doings closely. If you ever have a moment to spare and would care to drop in for a talk (off the record !) and a drink, my wife and I would be delighted to see you. I would like you to meet her. I am sorry to disappoint you as I have always tried to be helpful to you and yours !

"Yours sincerely,

"CLAUDE AUCHINLECK."

Nobody could help liking General Auchinleck. His modesty was endearing. He was a fine general who suffered by reason of two factors : (1) a chronic lack of equipment at a vital period, and (2) his own loyalty to old colleagues. He could do nothing about the first, but if he had been more ruthless and sacked a few misfit subordinates before the battles of Bir Hacheim and Knightsbridge, he might still have been in command of the Middle Eastern Army when it reached Tunis. But, in any event, he was

the first 'hero' of Alamein. If he had not stopped Rommel there at midsummer, 1942, Montgomery would have had no base from which to sally forth to victory in October. Wavell and Auchinleck had much in common. Wavell, too, was perhaps over-loyal to old friends. He was a scholarly man, averse to publicity and intrigue. When I met him he seemed to be very tired. He felt, I think, that his military career was over. He was interested in writing on military history. He had got bitten by the insoluble problem of India. Churchill had already tempted him with the Vice-royalty and he must, already, have been dreaming of making an Indian summer career for himself in politics. His appointment as Viceroy gave Congressmen the opportunity to make the crushing observation—"After 200 years of progress, you British are reduced to setting up a military governor in India!" But Wavell is very far from being a Blimp or a Prussian: he keeps up with affairs in the Soviet Union and has an excellent knowledge of the Russian language: relations between India and the U.S.S.R. are increasingly important.

Wavell is a poor man. His cast of mind is, I should say, basically more liberal than that of his predecessor Lord Linlithgow.

Wavell received me on the steps of the Resident's red-brick bungalow in Imphal, over which the Union Jack was flying. General Somervell was seated on the steps, Southern style, smoking a pipe. British and American staff officers stood around. Wavell wore a bush-shirt over a khaki sweater on which there was scarcely room for his four rows of medals.

"Let's go and walk on the lawn—it's pleasanter over there," he said. And indeed the greensward dotted with flowering shrubs and rose-trees with a view over a lake towards distant mountains recalled a spring day in some English country-house garden.

He spoke at length about the relation between the Red Army's victories and those in North Africa and the strategy being employed against the Japanese. He doubted whether the Germans, after the battering the Russians had given them at Stalingrad, possessed enough strength to put on another summer offensive in 1943. The reopening of the Mediterranean, he said, would bring relief to the Indian theatre of war and added that he had "raised

my little voice " to ask for some Indian divisions back again from the Middle East.

After talking a while " off the record " about the fighting spirit of the Japanese and how we were seeking to weaken it, he volunteered the observation that the Manipur front was an intriguing place.

" Would you advise me to stick around here, although there seems to be little doing at the moment ? " I asked.

" Well . . . ahem . . . " said Wavell diffidently, " I don't think I would leave just now, you know. . . . Not if I were you, you know. . . . "

I had heard enough. A straight tip from a field-marshal is all any correspondent could wish for. And this tip was very straight

Two days later I was out on one of the best stories of the whole war.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### WINGATE'S CIRCUS

ORDE CHARLES WINGATE is invading Burma. He and several thousand other guys. This looks like a commando raid and, in a way, it is the biggest commando raid of the war, yet no commandoes were ever asked to do what Wingate demands of these boys. They are going in to fight and live in the heart of Japanese occupied Burma for three months, maybe six, and I am going with them.

Few had heard of Wingate before outside the military staff colleges, but one will certainly hear plenty of him from now on. Some say he is mad. But he was astute enough to sell this extraordinary expedition to Field-Marshal Wavell who has given him all the equipment he has asked for and a free hand, and some very rum equipment it is too—strictly non-mechanised and pre-blitzkrieg, you understand, just mules, oxen for carrying fodder then to be eaten themselves, horses, elephants which tote eight hundred pounds apiece, a few bicycles and bullock carts and of course mortars, Bren and Sten guns, Tommy guns, automatic rifles with telescopic sights, loudspeakers and duplicating machines to make propaganda amongst the Burmans and plenty of portable radios, on one of which Wingate intends to sit down in the heart of the jungle and make a regular report each evening, direct to Wavell in New Delhi.

Wingate organised the Patriot's revolt which preceded the British invasion of Abyssinia. Then his career slumped. He was a major without a job. He felt we were fighting the war all wrong—particularly the war against Japan, and he didn't hesitate to tell Wavell so. His friends say right then he felt suicidal. But Wavell having met him and probably sensed the *mystique* which emanates from this man (for Wingate is a Fuehrer in the one field of human endeavour where Fuehrers are right and necessary)

summoned him from obscurity, made him a brigadier and told him to put his ideas into practice.

So at thirty-eight this tall, thoughtful, yellow-haired man with the abstracted eye, the hawklike profile and the air of a minor poet finds himself marching into Burma at the head of a ghost army which has been trained six months to the tip of perfection for the gruelling task ahead of it. Leaning on his shepherd's stock with his bush shirt already torn and his East African topee of archaic design greening with the damp he swings lightly through the jungle and gives me the same argument he must have given Wavell initially.

"We must not overrate the Jap," he said. "His plans are such as might be made by the Rumanian, or any other third-rate, general staff. The Jap is no superman. His strength is that if you sit him in a hole, give him a hundred rounds and ask him to die for his emperor, he will do so. The thing for us to do is to leave him sitting in that hole and go elsewhere, behind him. Leave him dying for his emperor, without food or water. If we combine political warfare with fighting we shall beat the Jap, for after all we have the political message the world wants to hear—the message of freedom. A good general must also be a politician (but *vide* Hitler) the clever politician is rarely a general. I shall do much political work in Burma, but my political aims are very simple. I make no promises the United Nations cannot keep. I have some experience in raising irregular bodies in an occupied country and I am convinced the days when you could go in with some gold and rifles and ask tribesmen to fight for you are past.

"Tribesmen don't respect white men who invite others to fight for them, but they will fight with you in their own interest. So I shall say to the Burmese, 'We are here to fight a common enemy; we don't need you to fight our battles for us, but if you want to assist and prove yourselves worthy to fight with us, we will train you and assist you.' You will certainly be better off after the war if you fight now, rather than let us win the war for you; you do not want your fields to become the battleground between two great powers, experiencing all the horrors of war without experiencing its compensations or rewards.'"

Banging his stick on the ground, Wingate said very emphatically, "I am certainly not going in to make Burma safe for Colonel Blimp. Manifestoes I carry call on the Burmese to do nothing to aid the fierce scowling Jap. For the rest they'll see our military power and the air power I shall whistle up whenever I need it, and our arms, better than any written propaganda, will speak for themselves."

Shortly before I had never heard of Wingate or his Chindits as, at his suggestion, we began to call them. (Chindits are the fabulous lions which guard the Burmese pagodas.)

In Manipur State all had been quiet—scarcely even patrolling. Came a sudden summons from General Scoones, who said, "You can march into Burma with the Chindits to-morrow. You must carry a week's rations on your back and be completely self-contained ; you must ask the Chindits for nothing, for they cannot carry passengers. You have my permission to march with them as far as the Chindwin River and get back from there as best you can, but you must promise me not to go further, for you are not a fighting man and could not pull your weight. Besides, they may be in there half a year and I dare say you have other things to do."

I looked at my inadequate shoes—"gent's Oxfords," a show salesman would call them—and bethought myself how I would show up alongside these highly trained men, I who had been motoring around the Western desert during the past eighteen months where we rarely set foot to ground, and I havered slightly. But the lure of the story was too strong. So before dawn the next day I found myself setting off to find Wingate.

Stuart Emeny of the *News-Chronicle* and Martin Moore of the *Daily Telegraph* went with me.

That night we found him sitting with his officers around a log fire in the jungle eating pears out of a can and lucidly defending the comic strip as a contribution to contemporary art. His talk ranged far and wide as his men listened. He was very much the soldier—philosopher, the General Gordon type, but without Gordon's religiosity. On the eve of staking his life and reputation on this wild venture, he scarcely mentioned military matters, but seemed very concerned about the future of British literature.

Poetry, he said, had become separated from the people. His favourite poem was Grey's elegy, you could understand that. He quoted from the Greeks to illustrate his points, anglicising with unostentatious politeness for those who could not follow.

He rebuked a man who discarded an empty can—"This jungle is a beautiful place, don't let's tarnish it."

He even botanised, jumping up and gathering rare flowers whose odour only exhaled at night. Then he turned to me, "Better get an early bed for we invade to-morrow. My cook, Fu Manchú, will give you some tea. Eat some bully and get some rest."

Abruptly the campfire broke up, the chief strolling off and bedding himself down under a tree already dripping with night dew.

It is forlorn and intimidating, this first jungle night. You acclimatise yourself to the moaning of the trees stirred by the night breeze, the barking of baboons and the occasional stirring of bigger animals, but it is hard to shake off the fear of snakes and impossible to disregard the penetrating dampness and cold ground. The droning of mosquitoes goes on like the noise of distant machinery. Small risk of malaria this time of the year, they tell me, but if you are unlucky it may be the cerebral variety—frequently fatal. Few sleep without a net despite the discomfort of wet netting around your face.

The early morning bugle sounds. I am allotted to march with cheerful Major Scott, until recently electrical engineer with the Liverpool Corporation. His second in command worked in Lancashire at the great soap works of Lever Brothers', and the third in a Liverpool department store.

I strap on my pack, with blanket and groundsheet rolled on the top. A Burmese prince who is going in to rally his people for Wingate cuts me a bamboo stick which he says I shall need for climbing. I have got nearly fifty pounds on my back. The Chindits have light parachute rations, but we must stagger along under bully and biscuits. I carry a sterilising outfit to render the filthiest water drinkable, and an aluminium cooking pot. The Chindits sleep in one very light Kashmir blanket between two and carry only one change of shirt, socks and underpants, and no

shaving gear. All are growing beards. Everything is sacrificed for lightness and mobility. Wingate's headquarters is any log he happens to sit on, the portable radio alongside and one mule pannier with essential papers.

We set off, a long serpentine column. Each pack animal has a man guiding him. The route lies from Tamu just inside Burma, some forty miles to the north-east up the Yu River valley to Thaman, thence over a mountain trail two thousand feet high to the Chindwin River.

It soon gets warm and we sweat till we glisten like characters in some phoney jungle film. But I must say by daylight this jungle is very lovely, like a beautiful national park—not gloomy or frightening at all.

Wingate lopes up alongside. Naturally he is not sweating in the least. I get off twice with him on the wrong foot. Firstly by making a vague reference to Lawrence of Arabia, of whom Wingate has a poor opinion, and with whom he dislikes being compared, and secondly by being of the opinion that the Chindits seemed rather like Soviet guerrillas.

"Not on your life," says Wingate. "Guerrillas are patriots who fight for the independence of their country—usually after it has been overrun and usually unsuccessfully, because they lack equipment and supplies. No, my force is best termed a long-range penetration group. One of our functions is to organise Burmese guerrillas to fight alongside us, but primarily I am going to employ two weapons which have never been fully exploited before and certainly not in unison—air power and radio. Air action by itself is comparable to firing your artillery without ever going forward to follow it up on the ground. Air power, like artillery, should be used conjointly with observation posts on the ground. I use radio to keep contact between myself and my columns, to keep touch with my base and to summon protection, striking power and supplies from the air. My force consists of a number of columns and my own headquarters column, each entirely self-contained with a commando group, to perform demolitions, reconnaissance and bridge-building; a section of regular British infantrymen, a section of Gurkhas, a section of the Burma Rifles regiment all knowing the terrain well and expert in propaganda amongst



natives, and R.A.F. men as radio technicians and liaison with our supporting aircraft.

"This expedition will live off the country and for the rest be supplied entirely by air," he added. "The animals are very important. Should my pack-train become diseased and die we would be scuppered. But I have no muleteers as such ! Every man is a fighting man and it takes even higher courage to lead an animal into action than it does to lie down and fire. The Distinguished Conduct Medal might well signify 'died chasing mules.'"

At a track junction Wingate paused and drawing his kukri or curved Gurkha knife, cut the bark off a tree, making a sign thereon to indicate the direction and, at the same time, he ordered five of the men to fell a tree across an alternative path to prevent men losing their way. I asked him how he chose his men.

"Most of my Chindits are not in their first youth," he replied, "but married men between twenty-eight and thirty-five who previously had done coastal defence work and never dreamt they would be shock troops doing one of the toughest jobs of this war. But I selected them deliberately. If ordinary family men from Liverpool, Manchester, etc., can do this specialised jungle war behind the Jap lines, then any fit man in the British Army can do likewise, and we show ourselves to the world as fighting men second to none—which I believe we are.

"It is highly important for the making of the peace after the war that the British race should prove themselves again to be supreme fighters. Should we fail, most of us will never be heard of again ; should we succeed, we will have demonstrated a new style of warfare to the world, bettered the Jap at his own game and brought nearer the day when the Jap will be thrown bag and baggage out of Burma."

It is ironic to reflect that just when the world must be thinking our war against the Japs in Burma is proceeding pretty haltingly, this prodigious activity should be going on behind the Jap lines. Yes, we are well inside Japland now. British troops are staging a diversion farther south which is probably why we encountered no opposition so far.

Marching beside red-moustached Captain Jack Potter, once of the *Daily Express*, we play our "Cliché game" when he describes the vegetation as 'lush,' swamps as 'mosquito infested,' crocodiles as "sinister saurians basking beady-eyed on mud-banks," and I reply, "See those trees dripping with exotic orchids."

To his men he calls out, "Keep a stiff upper lip, Carruthers," and when we pass a village with the old crones squatting in the sun he cries, "Come now, Carstairs, no mammy palaver!"

During the midday heat we rest, then push on as the evening approaches. Now the track narrows till it is rarely more than eighteen inches wide. The mules with their broad panniers keep crashing against the trees; loads are displaced and it requires infinite patience to tighten girths and prevent things from falling off and getting lost. The oxen are even harder to handle, and they climb badly. And great Scott, how we are climbing now? Up mountain sides which have a gradient of one in two. The path winds over flat slippery rocks, through streams rushing down from the mountains. We are under cover the whole way as dense jungle covers the hills and nobody could spot us from the air.

It is getting dark now. The moon is up but it does not penetrate the curtain of leaves. You can just see the shape of the man ahead of you, and you struggle to keep up with him. Once you lose sight of that shape you might easily diverge from the track, drawing the whole column after you.

We are all getting very weary. Every now and then we pass the motionless figure of a sentry guarding the line of march. We stumble along cursing with a richer vocabulary than any of us knew we possessed. My feet, which normally cope with twelve stone, are now trying to support close on sixteen. No wonder you feel you'll never be able to straighten your shoulders again, even when the load is removed.

A mule misses its footing and crashes over a precipice, screaming in a horribly human way as it goes over. There is a gun on its back which must be retrieved, so the column halts while muleteers lower themselves over the tree-spattered 'kud,' as they call the mountain sides, with ropes and crowbars.

This gives us a little breathing spell and we sink down on the

bank, grateful to take the weight off our backs and feet. It seems one of the elephants had gone over the kud too, but he scrambles back under his own power.

I believe those creatures could carry a load across a tight rope.

Whistling like a bird call sounds down the line. Is it one of those Japanese signals we have heard so much about? No, it is our own major ordering us to resume the march. We plod on in the darkness, mindful of nothing save the effort of just putting one foot in front of another and keeping one's balance and not falling down.

Now we stumble down into a valley where a few campfires are. We are told to halt and fall out. We obey, literally. Take a step out of line, spread a blanket, lie down, nibble biscuits, drink water and fall asleep. Soon we wake up again when the sweat on our bodies turns icy cold. The night seems interminable. Animals lost en route and brought in by recovery parties step over us all night long. Each passing mule methodically knocks down my mosquito netting spread upon twigs.

At dawn the march begins again. Three days and three nights we spend marching to the Chindwin. The track is one upon which thousands of refugees left Burma last year. Skeletons are still lying in the undergrowth and some hillman, with grisly humour, has put old clothes on one of them.

We find human bones along the path where poor wretches, worn out with disease and fatigue, had lain down to die.

And now we get the first sight of the Chindwin, a broad stream down there fifteen hundred feet below, its channel hung with mist. Reconnaissance parties have already swum across and report the opposite bank momentarily clear of Japanese, but there is always a chance that an enemy launch may come up the river so anti-tank guns are mounted along the bank to guard the crossing.

Darkness gathers and a thunderstorm rolls down from the mountains as we approach. Talking is forbidden as we near the river. Silently guides marshal us through the village of Ton He, whose inhabitants sit without lights in shuttered houses high on stilts. An exquisite smell of flowering shrubs revives us as we pass through the streets and across rice paddy fields. Lightning illuminates the path. The heavenly artillery of thunder crashing

overhead is the only opposition we encounter. Here is the river crossing. Major Scott strips off his clothes and runs naked in, leading his charger. The commando boys load their rubber boats. The major calls out as he disappears into the dark stream, "Have a drink for me at the Cornmarket, if you are home before me." (Cornmarket is a Liverpool pub.)

I wade some way over and park on a sandbank to watch the crossing. The thunder ceases and the moon reappears. A long line of men and animals stretches behind us from the margin of the jungle to the water's edge. In a sky now clear the sinister sound of aircraft is heard. We all stand stockstill, trying to escape observation and try to get the animals to do likewise. The plane circles around as though observing. I see it pass across the moon's aura. How can the airman up there fail to see this prodigious movement of men and beasts? But an R.A.F. officer sets our minds at rest. "O.K. boys, it's one of ours getting a bearing to drop supplies." And sure enough, the pilot switches on his lights. A flare goes up from the opposite bank and the machine makes its run, releasing its load of food and ammunition. The first aerial reinforcement has succeeded.

Half an hour later a second British plane comes over on an identical mission. All the while the swimming and ferrying of animals across goes on. The mules nearly drive one crazy; you take them to the water but you can't make them swim. Fifteen will be got halfway over, three will go on and all the others swim back.

Hour after hour with infinite patience, the stubborn, frightened animals are put to this obstacle again and again until at last all are across. Several columns are safely over now. I spread my blanket on the sandbank and sleep.

Before the first parrot has squawked in the dawn the crossing begins again. Wingate rides along the bank getting reports before riding his charger into the stream and swimming him across.

I begin thinking of the long way back—a hundred and twenty miles still before us. Once the Japs discover what is going on in their backyard it seems likely they will cross the river and, assuming the Chindits possess lines of communication which, of course,

they don't, will try to cut the same and we, walking back to India, will be right on that line.

This consideration spurs us on. The last Chindits are getting into boats and paddling across. A few Burmans in dug-out canoes come up like gondoliers plying for hire and calling "anymore for other side?"

The campfires of our men can be seen burning far away in the jungle to the east. Surely it cannot be long before the Japanese bring them to their first engagement?

Frightened Burmese who heard the padding of troops and animals through their village all night long emerge with the day and stand agape on the river bank.

In a beautiful little temple with a gold pagoda the priest tolls the morning bell.

For whom tolls the bell? For many of these valiant men from smoky English towns, Burmese forests and Nepalese mountains whose voices are fading away across that river now, fading out into a wild adventure whence many cannot hope to return.

One of the last across is my friend Captain Moti Lal Katju, the favourite nephew of the poetess Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, who is imprisoned with Gandhi in the Aga Khan's palace at Poona. This Indian intellectual is as nationalist as his fellow Kashmiri Brahmin Jawaharlal Nehru, but precisely because he wants India for the Indians he has volunteered from a life of wealth and comfort to fight Japan and, with a tommy-gun in one hand and a notebook in the other, he is going in as the expedition's official historian. Already he has marched three hundred miles and his feet are in ribbons.

We stand together in the stream shaking hands. Gandhi has begun his fast and I am going to Poona so Moti says, "Then you'll see my aunty—give her my love, won't you?" and this gallant Indian whose Military Cross, won in Libya, was the first award to a newswriter in this war for bravery under fire, waved and swam out of my sight. I never saw him again.

Three months later, the day before he was due to cross the Indian frontier into safety, he was killed in a Japanese ambush.

We felt pretty isolated after the last Chindit had crossed the

Chindwin and we stood on the banks of the river alone. Five of us were going to march back into India together—Emeny and Moore, Captain Jack Potter, Captain Tony Beauchamp, the official photographer, and myself. Something had been said about giving us an escort, but no guides showed up. We had to rely on our own sense of direction to get ourselves home.

I am a bit fanatical about my bump of locality, about being able to find my way in strange country without a compass. Emeny was rather proud of his bump too, and we had a few disputes at track junctions in consequence.

The ardour of the Chindits had kept us going all the way out but now that we were alone, our spirits fell. We spent an hour or two wandering in the temple by the riverside, taking pictures of the Buddhas and of the charming priests' houses on stilts. There was dead silence in the village. Seeing us there, the priests had gone away. To tip off a Japanese patrol perhaps? We made jokes about this to cover the considerable uneasiness we all felt.

We climbed up the hill and rested in the undergrowth during the heat of the day. At one moment, wandering around in search of bananas to pick, Emeny and I thought we stumbled on a wild boar. Something large and black was breathing heavily in front of us, but being unarmed, we lost no time in checking up on our fears, but made off towards the shelter of Potter's and Beauchamp's revolvers—the only weapons the party possessed.

In the evening we started the march back. We climbed for several hours then, when the moon rose, parked down on top of the mountain on a site where the Chindits had camped on their way out. A lot of their equipment was lying about there. Lightly loaded though they had been, the men had found their blankets too much for them. Hundreds of blankets were lying about under the trees, and a considerable number of binoculars—several hundred pounds worth of equipment. Truly, war is a wasteful business! An enterprising second-hand dealer could have cleaned up a little fortune in this one glade, but I don't know how he would have got it away. Although we had eaten ourselves right out of bully and were living now on parachute rations Major Scott gave us, we did not pick up a single 'souvenir.'

Next day was very hot. The mosquitoes proved to be man-

eaters, even though they were not malarial. We slogged along hour after hour, resting ten minutes out of each hour. The parachute nuts and raisins didn't seem to agree with me. I began to get 'that sinking feeling' in the stomach and my ten minute rests started to stretch out into quarter of an hour, then twenty minutes.

Martin Moore, a herbiferous creature and a nut-eater in normal life, fared the best of all. He seemed tireless. We asked him to stop and crop a hedgerow every now and then, to give us a chance to catch up. I was in poor shape and Stuart Emeny was not much better.

Nevertheless we kept plodding on, one foot in front of the other, without thinking too much about our wretched state. Actually, we were making better time going back than on the way out: for one thing, there were no mule-trains or elephants to encumber the track. And then we were all a little Jap-conscious: that gave wings to our feet, too.

At long last we sighted the Yu River. In the last few miles we managed to lose ourselves in the undergrowth and it was evening before we scrambled down to the river bank and, throwing off our filthy clothes, jumped in. The water ran fast and icy cold. We felt as though we were swimming in champagne.

We were not yet out of Burma, but we were close to the frontier—and safe.

As weeks passed, Wingate's nightly reports to Wavell piled up a picture of the havoc caused to the Japanese far and wide in Burma north of Mandalay. The few thousand Chindits had a whole Japanese division after them. They cut the main north-south railway in seventy places. They severed the communications behind the Japanese force which had been advancing into the Far North towards Fort Herz, threatening American installations in Northern Assam, and they disrupted the supply-line of the Japanese operating against the Chinese up the Burma Road. They blasted bridges, raided airfields and fired supply dumps.

Once Wingate radioed urgently for air support to force the crossing of a river, but when the planes reached the pinpoint they reported nobody there, and we feared the worst.

Once a column headquarters was cut up and two codes captured, so that for days communication lapsed until all the columns could be warned to operate a new code. The Chindits' casualties were heavy and the wounded had to be left behind since evacuation was impossible. Wingate's sardonic quip was, "Well, boys, we will be as well tended by a Burmese maiden in a village as in the average military hospital, no doubt."

But when the rains came in May, bringing killing malaria, a far greater number than we had ever dared to hope came back alive. Just 80 per cent. In Wingate's words, they had "bested the Jap at his own game."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### THE BATTLE OF SWEET LIMES

MAHATMA GANDHI has been fasting now for just two weeks. It is not a fast "unto death," as previous ones have been, but a fast "unto capacity." This means that Mr. Gandhi is essentially undertaking a penance and that, if he finds his strength is not equal to the ordeal, he will imbibe just sufficient of the juice of the sweet lime to keep him alive. He is not courting death. And the Indian sweet lime is a fruit with a high content of sugar and vitamins.

He is fasting partly as a protest against the Government of India's publication of a "White Paper" blaming the Congress party for the disturbances and murders which took place after the arrest of the Congress leaders in August, 1942: this "White Paper" certainly seems an uneven document. It indicts the Congress leaders at a time when—by virtue of the fact that every one is in prison—they are unable to state the case for the defence. Gandhi wants to put his own defence to the world: to do this he will have to consult with other members of the Congress working committee, and this is not possible whilst members are scattered over India in different gaols.

But Mr. Gandhi is also fasting to obtain his own release. The government offered to release him at the beginning of his fast "for the duration thereof" because they did not want to risk having him die on their hands.

"If you want to conduct a three weeks' penance, which at the age of seventy-three is bound to be dangerous to you, we will let you out in order to do so," said the Viceroy, in effect. "But when you've fasted, you must go back to detention in the Aga Khan's palace at Poona again."

This did not suit Mr. Gandhi at all. He wants to be released 'unconditionally.' And he knows very well that although he has announced this is not a fast unto death, his friends, the editors of

the Nationalist newspapers, can be counted upon to play the story so big that millions throughout India will believe his life is in imminent danger, and will put well-nigh irresistible pressure upon the government to let him out.

This is just what they have been doing for two weeks, with the result that Gandhi's daily health chart and the slightest variations in his equilibrium are reported in black type and huge headlines, whilst the war is relegated to the back pages. "Gandhi is dying" screams one paper; "Mahatmaji's Plea Bruises World Conscience," cries another. There is little but Gandhi on any front page except for one item in a Bombay paper which catches the eye by reason of its brittle inconsequence—characteristic of much Hindu-English journalism. Reporting the collapse of an apartment house, with workmen trapped beneath, it proclaims, "Sons of Toil Buried Beneath Tons of Soil."

Apart from that, it seems to be Gandhi, Gandhi all the way.

Millions of quiet cultivators are quite unaffected by this rather artificial drama, but political India—the few millions of reading and voting people—is certainly stirred very deeply. There is a tense, hysterical atmosphere discernible among the sophisticated Indians with whom the average European mixes. There can be no doubt that, as political hunger strikes go, this one is a smashing success. It is focusing attention on Gandhi, a man who was in some danger of being forgotten, and through him it is reopening the whole thorny, complex problem of Congress non-coöperation in the war which has been dormant these six months since all the leaders were arrested. One can imagine the effect that must be produced in America.

But in India the dominant emotion brought forth by the fast is religious. The so-called 'vernacular' papers are full of mystical editorials in which the words "Great Soul" appear with what must seem, to Western eyes, embarrassing repetitiveness. To us this fast appears a clear political issue, like the hunger strikes in Ireland during the 'troubles.' But in Indian eyes this is a religious exercise. To read political motives into it is rather like describing a Papal Encyclical as "Pius's New Party Platform."

Perhaps this other-worldly, Indian approach to the event is catching. In any event, the circumstances which led to my leaving

Burma and racing 2000 miles across India to Bombay in order to be present at this fast would certainly be susceptible of a mystical interpretation by a typical Gandhi devotee. Personally, I think it was merely a rather remarkable coincidence, although I have been as attracted as most general readers by the theories of Time expounded by Dunne and glamourised by Mr. Priestley in a play or two.

On February 10th, 1943, being in the Indian state of Manipur up on the frontiers of Northern Burma, I drafted my foreign editor a cable saying, "As front quiescent suggest quick trip Bombay where political story promises."

On that day Mr. Gandhi began his fast. We had no newspaper and no radio where we were, and I did not discover that the fast had begun until over a week afterwards. I showed this cable to several colleagues who advised me not to send it as they felt sure something *was* going to happen on our front after all. And of course they were right, for two days later we set off on the adventures which I have recounted in the preceding chapter. One of them accused me of having heard so much of the gaieties of Bombay that I was prepared to abandon all thought of duty to go sample them forthwith. Actually, I wanted to get to the western side of India as my prospects of getting back to the Middle East seemed better from there, and I suggested "political story promises" because I had been told, "You can *always* pick up a political story in Bombay."

But the image of Mr. Gandhi was never further from my mind when, in a mood rather of blankness and frustration, I drafted the cable.

An Indian devotee would doubtless tell me that emanations from the Great Soul of Gandhiji, beginning his penance at Poona, travelled o'er plain and mountain and impressed themselves on my subconscious mind, after the Biblical manner of "Come Over into Macedonia and Help Us." So, to be fair, would the average English or American matron nurtured on Theosophy or Dunne-Priestley Time Consciousness.

I must say that I saw no portents in the sky on the night Mr. Gandhi laid off his usual diet. Yet, as coincidences go, this one was a wopper. I will say no more.

Travelling across the breadth of India, from near the Chinese border through Calcutta and Nagpur to Bombay, you have some opportunity to gauge how ordinary people react to Gandhi's penance. In the small places in Bengal, Bihar and the Central Provinces where the train stopped and one had long intervals for conversation with all sorts of people, one found little feeling about the fast either way. At Wardha, where Gandhi's famous *ashram* is situated, the people I talked with seemed strangely indifferent, but that may have been merely the prophet being without honour in his own country. But in the larger towns it was far otherwise.

On February 23, four cotton mills in Bombay closed in sympathy, and the next day twelve mills out of a total of about seventy were shut down.

At Nagpur, the geographical centre of India, the feeling was far from friendly. The average Hindu in a Gandhi cap looked at one with frank hostility.

"You are crucifying my Buddha," they seemed to be saying.

The *Nagpur Times*, a fairly typical Nationalist paper, seems to threaten the United States as well as the usual whipping boy, Britain, when its leader writer declares, "Whether he lives or dies, Gandhi is assured of his victory. If he is released unconditionally, the Imperialists will know how a frail person can shake two of the biggest democracies in the world and bring them down on their knees and get them to surrender despite all the brute force they have behind them. If he dies, the death-knell of Imperialism and even of American pretensions will have been sounded. The greatest man in the world is perilously near death. The government may not be aware of what Gandhi's death would mean to us and to them, and if they want to face the danger they are welcome to it. We can only pray that even now Mahatmaji may be saved for us and for the Britishers."

Other papers make the point that Gandhi, by purposely ending his life, might stir his countrymen to greater efforts for freedom than if he had lived out the few years remaining to him and assert that when he went into jail he vowed never to emerge into a country enslaved. But this doesn't square with the present demand for his unconditional release.

Every scrap of evidence that the country is being shaken to its

foundations is exploited : the visit of five schoolgirls to William Phillip's, Roosevelt's envoy, to ask for his intervention is solemnly recorded. And of course the usual pronouncements from London (they seem quite sound in that climate, but take on an unpleasant, smug bombast in this irritating, sticky air) are turned around to show that Britons know little about this crisis, and care less. Even if it is true that to the peasants who form 90 per cent of India the death of Gandhi would mean little, that still leaves 40 million literates among whom the shock would be felt with varying degrees of severity—and that *ought* to mean something to 45 million Britons.

I believe it is true, however, that an Indian reporter, when the fast began, transmitted from a remote village where he happened to be a most revealing interview with the village headman.

"What do you think of Gandhiji's fast?" asked the Indian reporter.

"Who is this man Gandhi?" replied the leader of the villagers.

It was extremely honest of this Indian reporter to file a story so damaging to the Congress thesis that Gandhi is the soul of the Congress, which is in turn the soul of India. But he might have spared himself the trouble for not a newspaper in India touched the story—least of all the British-owned papers.

*February 24, 1943.*—Here I am in Bombay after a dirty, dusty journey of nearly forty hours from Calcutta. The first thing I do on getting out of the train is to ask the ticket collector whether Gandhi is still alive. He nods his head. Newspapers bought recently out of the train window have been so alarmist that I feared I might really arrive too late. But in that event I felt sure I would be at the right spot to report the riots which would inevitably follow his death.

However, there seems no doubt that Gandhi's descent towards suicide has slackened pace and that, although his life is still in danger, it is not ebbing so fast as it was two days back. He has just one week to go before the stipulated twenty-one days' fast is over.

Apparently he overestimated his resistance by refusing to take a larger amount of fruit juice some days ago when his doctors

saw he plainly needed it ; then, becoming too weak to make any decisions for himself, the doctors had to get an emergency quantity of liquid into him to keep life going. Two days ago few thought he could possibly survive another seven days, but now his wonderful constitution, which has hitherto held off the danger of uraemia gaining a hold on his enfeebled frame, seems to hold the promise that he might last it out.

I go to the Taj Mahal Hotel and telephone through to Poona to get some material on which to base my preliminary story. The first thing that strikes me is how few of the many American and British special correspondents in India have thought it worth while to come to Bombay or Poona to record this curious drama. This is news judgment which baffles me. I should have thought the possible death of Gandhi a far greater story than the piddling sort of operations which are going on in Burma just now (for the story in my last chapter was destined to be kept secret for many months yet ; and in Arakan, the fighting was small beer indeed).

Gandhi is being looked after by no fewer than seven doctors, including a general of the Indian Medical Service and a Congressite doctor who was interned along with the Mahatma. One of them scotches severely the rumour that Gandhi in the past few days has been kept alive on injections of glucose. He has taken sweet lime juice diluted with water chiefly, this doctor says, because plain water caused nausea.

The political blackmail being exercised by the Nationalists is open and unashamed. Even the sleek Parsee clerks at the Taj Hotel put over a bit of Congress patter to me when they hear what I am here for. The Viceroy and his advisers are not in an enviable position and their attitude cannot appear attractive to any one, yet it must require considerable moral courage to stand firm against the rain of resolutions signed by thousands of people ranging from the Lord Simon-like liberal, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, to the Indian communists, all demanding Gandhi's unconditional release on the ground that his death would be a loss to the civilisation of the whole world.

Every Hindu politico seems to have jumped on the Gandhi bandwagon regardless of their previous attitude towards his disobedience campaign, going some way to prove Mr. Jinnah's

contention that they are all Hindus first and party men afterwards. Jinnah and his Moslem Leaguers all refused invitations to the Leaders' Conference in Delhi which demanded unconditional release, after which three members of the Viceroy's Council resigned as a protest against the treatment of Gandhi.

A compromise effort by Mr. Rajagopalachari, the very talented ex-Premier of Madras, who broke with Congress because he wanted to resist the Japanese by force of arms, seemed promising yesterday but it broke down last night when Rajaji, as they called him, announced that he had failed to persuade the Viceroy that a responsible official should be sent to see Gandhi with the evidence on which the government based the charges in their "White Paper," and that Gandhi should be permitted to see members of the Congress working committee to discuss these points. The suggestion was that Gandhi should end his fast in order to confer with the committeemen, thus saving his life without leading the government to bow to blackmail by ordering his release.

Government people tell me that, from their viewpoint, what rankles most is that never at any time since he was arrested has Gandhi, the prophet of non-violence, expressed a word of condemnation of the violence and butchery that went on after he was imprisoned. In his palace-prison Gandhi received newspapers telling of policemen burned alive by mobs. A word from him might have mitigated these horrors even if, as he claims, his followers were not responsible. That word never came.

*February 25th, 1943.*—Dr. Dinshaw Mehta, a nature cure expert, does not sign the daily Gandhi communiques which the Bombay Government issues, but he is actually the most important man around the Mahatma and gave me an inside view of what goes on inside the odd-looking mansion painted duck's-egg blue, into which none of us are allowed to penetrate. (We stand in small groups at the gate—twelve Indian journalists, a handful of British and Americans, along with two mangy pie dogs and a couple of ruthless-looking Anglo-Indian policemen.)

In a sense Mehta is conducting this fast. At times, he tells me, Gandhi has lost the power of decision, and Mehta has administered water, given massage and applied poultices, etc., according to his

judgment of when such attentions would be most beneficial. Mehta expects a second period of crisis may arise to-morrow or the next day. After the eleventh day of the fast when the doctors issued their communique declaring that Gandhi's condition was dangerous, the extraordinary old man as it were got his second wind which has carried him along in comparative ease and comfort up to the present time. But it would be a miracle if the same conditions endured up to next Wednesday when the fast is due to end.

Gandhi's blood is in poor condition. From the first day he has had no reserve of fat to draw upon, but has fallen back on his muscles, which circumstance, says Mehta, raises the danger of paralysis setting in. His heart is being put to a great strain.

Gandhi is lying on a hospital cot on the ground-floor of the mansion. Outside his window is a colonnade with a fine view over the hills and a vista down to the river bed below. Gandhi hasn't looked out of his window for some days. His mind seems concentrated within the high-ceilinged room and on the visitors continually coming and going, which is just as well, for the palace grounds are unkempt : the paths and the roses ramble unpruned. The place has very much the dreary air one would expect of a palace which is being used as a prison.

Gandhi is kept in daily touch with world news. Here is his programme :

04.00 hours.—Hindu, Moslem and Christian scriptures are read to the accompaniment of Indian violin music and prayers are said. Gandhi is sponged and has his mouth washed after the ceremonial Hindu fashion.

10.00 hours.—Massage administered and a bath given in bed.

11.00 until 14.00.—News summary read and visitors admitted.

14.00 hours.—The seven doctors hold their daily consultation around the bed.

14.00 until 19.00.—More visitors.

19.00 hours.—Evening prayers.

19.30 until 04.00.—Fitful sleep.

During the day mud packs, which Dr. Mehta considers beneficial, are applied to his abdomen.



A considerable number of inmates from Gandhi's ashram at Sewagram have been admitted into the grounds. They hang about in the wings, as it were, playing devotional songs on stringed instruments and indulging in desultory singing in high-pitched, monotonous tones.

It is stifling and noisy in the corridors among the press of people waiting to get in to see the Mahatma. The doctors and guards have their time cut out to prevent would-be callers from making a nuisance of themselves and upsetting the patient.

Indeed, it is a revelation to see the assortment of cranks and purveyors of queery-leery nonsense of all kinds who have come from all parts of India to get in on this strange episode. The sober politicians and Nationalist big businessmen who call find themselves in an odd *galère*. It has been Gandhi's misfortune—like other prophets—to attract much human dross amongst the gold all his life, and now that his life is called into question, he is having to put up with the importunities of many tiresome people whose sympathy he would doubtless prefer to receive from a distance.

But he remains mild-humoured. When some children who had accompanied their parents into the palace crowded noisily into his room to-day, he had some sticky sweetmeats brought and distributed among them. And he enjoyed the visit of his eighty-year-old sister, Shrimati Goki Ben.

The old lady tripped into the sickroom as lively as a cricket and brought smiles to Gandhi's face. To the doctors she brought reassurance in the inherited toughness of the Gandhi family to survive: the sister is as spare and wiry as the brother and looks as if, she too, could cope with a twenty-one-day fast without being seriously incommoded.

Gandhi shows no diminution of interest in the world around him, except when he is sunk in periods of trance-like meditation. These periods, of course, prompt much interest among the American reporters present as to whether the whole business is not a manifestation of Yogi.

In a sense, they may be right. I should think it scarcely possible for a man of seventy-three to fast three weeks on the basis of a body schooled for years to subsist on a herbiferous diet

without practising what we in the West understand to be the principles of Yogi—an extension of Spartan methods of bodily control up to the point where the body can be directed by the mind not only into doing without sustenance but actually benefiting from the deprivation. Apparently it is only because the inactive, resting organs cannot eliminate waste products that danger arises through the possibility of uraemic poisoning. Otherwise Gandhi might drift on in this trance-like state almost indefinitely.

Here in Poona the atmosphere is of a mediæval religious penance undertaken for political ends. The impact of this penance upon modern India forms an astonishing contrast when one sees it at work, as I did before coming up here, in the great city of Bombay. When one walks along Marine Drive, that promenade scooped out of the sea in the past six years by the energetic Indian-run municipality, which now rivals the Promenade des Anglais in Nice or the Malika Nazli promenade in Alexandria ; when one visits the lavish villas of the Parsee millionaires on Malabar Hill and the functional apartment houses that might have been built by le Corbusier but were actually designed by Indians ; or when one wanders along Hornby Road with its cleanly, bourgeois air of Birmingham-cum-Eastbourne—then one cannot understand how Gandhi's India, with its spinning-wheels, its religious orders and its squalid, saintly poverty, can have any influence upon this newer India of sophisticated Parsees and Oxford-trained Brahmins. And yet it is precisely in Bombay, the most cosmopolitan and civilised town in India—and *not* in the backwood villages where they neither read nor vote—that this mediæval fast is having its most profound effect.

Walking along Mahatma Gandhi Road near Bombay University, I stopped some students at random and asked them what benefit they conceived India would obtain if Gandhi resumes eating again next Wednesday without the government having yielded to his demands. These well-spoken youths, one of whom had been educated in London, had various theories which boiled down to the suggestion that Gandhi would score a "moral victory" before the world. He would, they said, have focused universal attention on the fact that in the fourth year of the war

for democracy India's problem was still unsolved. They uttered the word "Gandhiji" with bated, reverential breath.

I replied that surely the world was sufficiently conscious of this unfortunate fact already; and just where would this moral victory be scored? In Russia, where Gandhi was not getting a "good press"? In England or America where Progressives certainly wanted to see Indians governing their own country but *not* as Japanese Gauleiters, or perhaps merely in the Axis lands?

I put the same question to some office workers. One said, "Gandhi fasts, but Nehru eats sensibly and thinks the better for it," from which I gathered that he was a Congress Socialist. Another, wearing the odd Parsee headpiece shaped like a cow's hoof, said, "Gandhi is a saintly man and is right to fight government on any issue, for all governments are bad," from which I assumed him to be an Anarchist. The third said, "Gandhi is answerable to no man: he is the father and mother of all India," from which I supposed he was a mystic.

But from none of these could I obtain any positive clear-cut statement of aims or policy, and I reflected that Gandhi has not only bewildered and—if you like—outmanœuvred the Western world with his evasive, shadowy methods of making politics but has also had a befogging effect upon the Indian mind, which is, by nature, none too lucid. As a result of his activities over two decades the Indian political scene has become sicklied o'er with a pale cast of mysticism and mumbo-jumbery. If during this period Congress had been dominated by a practical politician like Kemal Ataturk or Sun Yat Sen, would not India be much nearer independence to-day? There is, in fact, a group of younger Congressmen who think just that: but of them more in another place.

Meanwhile the well-informed Bob Stimson of the *Times of India* tells me that some Congress intellectuals are taking the line that a reconciliation between Gandhi and the government is desirable even at this late hour in order to check the wild men of the party who, they claim, would be ready to treat with the Japanese once they were out of gaol and in a position to do so. But from my short experience I would hazard that a more realistic explanation of the desire in certain Congress quarters to bring

Gandhi and the government to a compromise is the realisation that the United Nations are far stronger now than in August last when Gandhi was arrested, that there can no longer be any doubt as to who is going to win the war and settle the peace, and that hence it is a tactical mistake for the Indian Nationalists to sulk in detention until the war is won. Hence the use of Gandhi's fast to try to get the government to shift its ground and agree to negotiate with Congress on its own terms, or at least to strengthen the diminished bargaining power of the Congress.

The issue, however, is not represented in a realistic light in the Indian press, which has pulled out the 'Tremolo' stop to its full extent and is playing mere tear-jerkers on the harmonium. The "Great Soul," the "Light of the World" is dying, we are told. The Viceroy, of course, is Pontius Pilate and Gandhi the Christ, or more nearly the persecuted Buddha, of modern Asia. The Japanese are given no role at all to play : very conveniently, they are just not mentioned. If one were a Buchmanite, I suppose one would find this sort of thing not unattractive. But to me there is a tone of masochism in these leading articles which represents the least personable side of the Hindu character.

Yet I don't think there is any conscious tendentiousness in all this. It is too naive for that. The *Bombay Chronicle*, for example, on its leader page castigates Churchill for refusing "even to permit Gandhi to be interviewed by such leaders as Mr. Rajagopalachari," whilst on its front page it announces Rajagopalachari's arrival in Poona where "it is understood he will see Gandhi." (He did, too, the next day). Then on page three the same paper for the first time mentions one of the outrages of August last which it seems strange that Gandhi never raised his voice to condemn—the murder of two young R.A.F. officers in a Calcutta-bound train. One was English, the other Canadian.

The news slips out in the form of the verdict delivered in a trial at Patna sentencing eight men to death and two to transportation for life.

The case for the prosecution was that a large mob gathered near the train which was halted by a signal and that, at some time not precisely stated, "a revolver was fired from a first-class compartment." Some of the mob jumped on to the footplate and

compelled the engineer to back the train into a nearby station, whilst others rushed the compartment from which the revolver was alleged to have been fired.

"Thus the two officers were hacked and speared to death in the course of ten minutes," declared the *Chronicle*. Their bodies were carried in procession on a cart and thrown into the River Ganges (a strange contribution to those supposedly sacred waters).

*February 26th, 1943.*—Rabindranath Tagore, the son of the great Bengali poet, arrived in Poona with his wife, declaring, "We just want to be near him. We feel it would be improper to ask to see him."

The same motive has brought hundreds of people into Poona and made it almost impossible to find a bed in the town. Some of these people are genuinely religious devotees or personal friends, like the English Quaker, Mr. Horace Alexander, but many seem actuated by mere vulgar curiosity. These are responsible for creating an atmosphere as unhealthy as that which once surrounded flagpole-squatting or non-stop dancing contests in the United States.

However, a healthy laugh was enjoyed by devotees and journalists alike when the ex-Premier of Madras met my friend the London *Daily Telegraph* correspondent.

Said Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari to L. Marsland Gander, "What odd names some of you fellows have got, to be sure . . ."

In Bombay the stock exchange was supposed to be open to-day, but none of the brokers did any business. Some sat on the floor of the exchange offering prayers for Gandhi's recovery.

*February 28th, 1943.*—One of Gandhi's doctors admitted to-day that on Tuesday last, when his condition was serious, Gandhi drank no less than 20 ounces of the juice of the sweet lime, which contains a considerable proportion of sugar and vitamins. In previous fasts he has undertaken, so great an intake of liquid food would have been considered to have marked the end of the fast. Since Tuesday Gandhi has repeatedly drunk two parts of this nourishing juice to one part of water. At the moment, he is taking only two ounces of fruit juice daily. I've seen the quantity he consumes and have measured it. Its equivalent in bulk to a

good stiff tot of whisky, or what's called a "Burrah peg" in this country.

If this amount can keep him alive, as it does, then those 20 ounces were certainly enough to check his decline and set him back on the path to recovery.

Quite plainly, Gandhi had no intention of risking death. In the first fifteen days Gandhi did fast strictly. He lost 20 lbs. in weight, reducing himself to six stone one pound. He has not been weighed since, but the doctors are sure his weight is still declining. One of them, wagging a finger at him, made him smile by saying, "Mr. Gandhi, you are a cannibal. You call yourself a vegetarian but you're feeding on your own tissues."

Gandhi's son Devadas, the editor of the Delhi paper *Hindustan Times*, was asked to-day whether he thought his father had made any progress in trying to convince his political opposites that they are doing wrong in keeping him imprisoned.

He replied, "From the point of view of converting the opposition, I am certainly disappointed. Mr. Amery (Secretary of State for India) has made a very caustic comment. But I do feel conversion in essence will take place among those in authority once Father has completed his self-inflicted torture."

Here we have the first admission to date that the fast is failing in its political objective. Gandhi junior plainly hopes that although the government has not been frightened by Gandhi's implied threat of self-destruction which, it now transpires, was never a serious threat, a fresh start might be possible once it becomes plain that the government has won its point. But I don't see how the government can move a step unless Gandhi is prepared to reaffirm his non-violent creed publicly and utter some sort of condemnation of what was done in his name—although no doubt against his desires—after he was arrested. If the fast peters out next Wednesday without any complications, the Viceroy will certainly find himself in a strong position. In this battle fought on limejuice and water, Gandhi is beginning to emerge the loser.

Some Congressites feel a 'compromise,' so dear to both English and Indian mentalities, might be effected by permitting Gandhi out of detention, ostensibly in order to 'recuperate' and

Lady Thackersee, widow of the cotton millionaire in whose marble mansion here Gandhi completed his fast in 1933, has prepared a room for him again next to the one in which his old sister is staying.

*March 1st, 1943.*—To-day is Gandhi's day of silence. The doctors have been trying to reduce the number of visitors, but Gandhi usually asks that they all be let in.

He has, however, a weapon against bores—a book balanced on the counterpane which he starts to read whenever visitors become tiresome. Just now he's using *Les Miserables* in this fashion.

So far as I can make out, Gandhi is not showing any change of front and, despite all the rumours that trickle out of the penance chamber, there is no real indication of a 'compromise.'

But Rajagopalachari remains in the wings ready to work upon the slightest hint of one.

Although Raja broke with Congress over the question of resisting the Japanese by force, many Nationalists tip him as perhaps the most likely first prime minister of a nationalist India. Should Congress one day change its attitude towards resisting fascist aggression, as did the Communist parties in the West after the U.S.S.R. entered the war, Raja's standing in a reformed Congress would be of the highest. Raja is a Tory of course—like Gandhi—but he is not a mystical, religious Tory. He is a practical politician and a good administrator.

The old Hindu Nationalism, dominated by religion, would have died had Gandhi died last week. Raja's secular nationalism, which is more like Kemal Ataturk's policy, has no place for fasting and mystical obscurantism. Perhaps Gandhi saw the threat of this standing by his bedside, and so determined to live.

*March 2nd, 1943.*—The Government of Bombay, mindful of the sometimes forgotten fact that Gandhi is a political prisoner, have stepped in to prevent the fast concluding to-morrow morning in a burst of well-considered publicity.

Gandhi and his friends had arranged for fifty persons to be present at the ceremonious occasion when the Mahatma will have a glass of orange juice raised to his lips, and it had been suggested that five American special correspondents, three British, two

newsreel men and two photographers and twelve Indian journalists would attend to record the scene.

Already the entrance hall of the prison-palace is becoming choked with gifts of fruit and flowers. All the internees in the palace, including Miss Slade, the British admiral's daughter, and Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, were to be present together with all Gandhi's relatives, including grandchildren to whom he was going to distribute sweetmeats.

To-day, however, the government ruled that only Gandhi's two sons, Devadas and Ramdas, are to be admitted into the palace after 8 o'clock to-night, so Gandhi will have only his sons and his fellow-internees present when the big moment comes.

Quite a hullabaloo was caused to-day by my despatch of three days ago revealing that Gandhi in one day had had 20 ounces of fruit juice. Word of it got around among the devotees surrounding the palace and from there spread all over Poona, and then pretty widely in Bombay. The *London News-Chronicle* and the *Daily Telegraph* had sent despatches in the same sense, and theirs and mine had been cabled back to India. But the British censorship would not pass them for publication in India. The reason given was that publication might "excite and upset" Indian opinion.

Half-joking and half-serious, one of the censors got me on the phone and suggested, "You had better get out of town. If 'they' think you've poured cold fruit juice on this fast, you'll be a marked man!"

Some of the Gandhi entourage are very sensitive lest the impression be caused abroad that the fast was a 'phoney' from the beginning. They don't deny my figures; in fact they amplify them, as follows:

On Wednesday last, feeling much strengthened by the 20 ounces imbibed the day before, Gandhi consumed another 9 ounces: on Thursday he had 7 ounces; on Friday 3 ounces. Spread over the whole three weeks, the average intake would have been from 5 to 6 ounces daily. But the entourage declare that, as Gandhi never meant to die but merely to undergo a penance unto capacity, the fact that he was obliged at one moment to fall back



somewhat heavily on fruit juice does not invalidate his performance.

Of course I never said it did. I do not think the fast was 'phoney.' But I do think that the treatment of it in the Indian Press was phoney in the extreme. A man who was undergoing a penance, with no suicidal intent, was represented by the Press as endangering his precious life to the limit as a protest against wrongful imprisonment by a cruel and vindictive government.

A normal man requires 1800 calories daily to maintain health, one of the doctors tells me, and the 20 ounces Gandhi took on one day contain only 400 calories. But, of course, Gandhi is a specialist in fasting and he enjoyed the finest available medical care throughout.

No, it was not a false fast. It has been a very carefully planned and expertly supervised flirtation with death.

What political result has Gandhi achieved? At the moment it must be stated, none whatever. His own status as a political prisoner remains precisely what it was when the fast began. For three weeks Gandhi has excited the emotions of millions of Indians on his own behalf, but amongst the hundreds of petitions which have been presented in favour of his own release I have seen scarcely one which had any concrete suggestion to advance towards solving the political deadlock.

The appeal sent to President Roosevelt's representative, William Phillips, to-day by the Progressive Group of politicians goes no further than to opine that "it seems more than likely from the correspondence between Gandhi and the Viceroy that once Gandhi is released *unconditionally* he would condemn those misdeeds that have been done in India in the name of the Congress and *maybe* hasten an honourable settlement with Britain." (My italics.)

Of course these people cannot speak for Gandhi, who is fully capable of writing to the Viceroy with his own suggestions, if he has any to make: but how weak and unimpressive is their argument! What government in the world, having successfully resisted the blackmail of a hunger strike, would be prepared to release a political prisoner *unconditionally* in the vague expectation that *maybe* the said prisoner would be good enough to come to a

settlement with them once he had been granted that which his strike had failed to win?

I think it is a tragedy that Gandhi and Nehru should be in jail (though certain Congressmen who would 'appease' Japan if they had the chance to open negotiations, surely ought to remain locked up). I think if any formula can be devised which would permit the bulk of the Congress leaders being released without Congress reverting to a policy which directly aids Japan, then the government ought to concede point after point, without thought of 'prestige,' to achieve it.

But appeals such as the above are lacking in all realism. They are not serious political documents at all—mere emotionalism and word-spinning. And far too many political initiatives in India just now do not rise above this level.

This is all the more distressing in that the divergence between some Indians who are in prison and others who are actively fighting Japanese fascism is not great, and often appears bridgeable.

I am sorry not to be entering Gandhi's sickroom to-morrow if only because I could have given Mrs. Sarojini Naidu the latest news of her nephew, Motilal Katju. I wonder if Katju's thoughts ever stray to this strawberry-shortcake palace where, with the fasting Mahatma, his favourite aunt is detained?

Strange inconsistencies of Indian politics in which unity often appears as close as a family relationship, yet always just out of reach!

*March 3rd, 1943.*—The voice of an English spinster singing an Anglican hymn heralded the breaking of Gandhi's fast at 9.30 this morning.

The voice was that of Mehra Ben, otherwise known as Miss Slade, and she sang Gandhi's favourite hymn, "As I survey the Wondrous Cross."

Gandhi lay propped up on his pillows with his eyes closed in prayer as she did so. There was a strong religious flavour about the ceremony inside the palace. Outside, in the dusty courtyard of a neighbouring sanatorium, Gandhi's friends held another simultaneous ceremony which had a high political content. Here prayers were offered before a statue of Gandhi worked in clay.

Lamps burned on either side of it and the orange and green Congress flag was displayed behind the statue.

Inside the palace, the show began at 9 o'clock when the other inmates, the doctors and guards trooped into Gandhi's room, making a semi-circle around the bed. All the Indians present wore white homespun out of compliment to Gandhi's famous campaign for homespun cloth with the exception of Mrs. Naidu, the poetess, who permitted herself the licence of a bright purple saree which matched the bowls of bougainvillea which decorated the room.

The clear voice of Miss Slade chanted the hymn as a solo, then passages from Hindu and Muslim scriptures were read accompanied by the plaintive music of an Indian violin. This was followed by the reading of poems by Rabindranath Tagore. It was the celebrated poet who at the conclusion of one of Gandhi's earlier fasts handed him the glass of orange juice with which he broke it. But the government having ruled against imported ceremonial, the glass containing six ounces of orange juice diluted with one ounce of water was handed to Gandhi by the careworn and timid old Hindu woman whom he took as a child bride half a century ago—Mrs. Kasturbai Gandhi.

It took the Mahatma ten minutes to sip the juice, after which he lay back apparently tired by the effort. His sons Devadas and Ramdas remained away as a protest against the exclusion of the fifty odd guests from outside.

Mrs. Naidu handed round glasses of orange juice on a tray, and all present drank from them at the same time as Gandhi. Then the remarkable old gentleman thanked his doctors for all they had done for him and closed his eyes in sleep.

At the meeting outside prayers and speeches went on for some time after this. Mr. Aney, one of the three members of the Viceroy's council who resigned over the government's attitude to the fast, read from the Sanskrit scriptures : Mr. Horace Alexander read passages from Paul's Epistles to the Romans and a Chinese professor who referred to Gandhi as " the living Buddha of our world," read excerpts from Buddha's teachings, whilst Hindus and Parsees present read from their scriptures.

I must say the impression of universality which by methods

such as these the Congress always manages to give to what is after all a political movement inspired by and closely anchored to the Hindu religion is extremely adroit. Rather as though the British Tory party began every meeting with readings from Karl Marx, Tolstoy and the Gospels as well as from Beaconsfield and Stanley Baldwin.

Not invariably adroit, however. Coming away from this meeting we were met by young Congressmen who distributed cartoons evidently intended to appeal to Christian sentiment. They depicted Christ on the Cross with Gandhi seated at a spinning-wheel behind prison bars close by, and bore the caption : " Even as Christ ? "

An Indian journalist asked us if we did not think these would appeal powerfully to Christians. Mumbling rather shamefacedly, as Europeans will when thus challenged, we said we thought they would have rather the opposite effect. Poor, diffident Europeans ! The Hindu artist, of course, would never have dared to offer such a comparison to Muslims. We might well have replied that a similar representation of Mahomet would have caused a riot amongst Indians.

Rajagopalachari is quick to issue a statement.

" All was dark when I came to Poona," he says, " but sitting beside Gandhi's bedside I have seen some light and caught some hope from him. There is much cause for anger and bitterness but we should check these feelings. The fast should chasten our souls."

Well, these are admirable sentiments. But what next ?

The Indian papers are quick to get out with the news.

" Gandhiji breaks Fast—Blessed End to Sufferings ! " cries one enormous headline. Columns of detailed descriptive follow.

The R.A.F., it seems, has made a big raid on Berlin—the greatest raid thus far of the whole war. But that is reported in small type on an inside page.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### INDIA AFTER GANDHI'S DEATH

I FULLY understand the itch to write a book on India which seizes almost every literate visitor during his first two months in the country. I feel it as badly as most, even though I have read E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, that cautionary tale of genius and last word upon its subject which tells us definitively that everything in India is indefinite, that nothing is what it seems, and that the search for patterns of coherence in a sub-continent dedicated to the Amorphous is a mere weariness of the flesh.

Nevertheless I met so many interesting people during and after Gandhi's fast that a little of what they told me can hardly fail to do this book good.

While the fast was on, and during the couple of days when it was widely thought that Gandhi might not pull through, I dined in the Bombay Secretariat with some of the younger I.C.S. men of the Presidency, and again on Malabar Hill with Americans, English and Indians in well-assorted groups—all what are called 'progressive' people—and the dominant impression I gained was that, live or die, the days of Gandhi's influence in India are numbered.

One young Hindu Congressman, in fact, did not hesitate to say that the death of Gandhi was becoming a political necessity. The country, he argued, was being fatally retarded in its struggle for freedom by the interplay of religious forces, and for this he held Gandhi chiefly responsible.

"When Gandhiji is gone," he said, "it will be possible to have real politics in India instead of the manoeuvring of races and sects, all dominated by religion. Indians will break up into groups which reflect their real interests. At last we will have a real Indian Communist party and a Socialist party and a Tory party too. At the moment Congress houses Fascists, big industrialists,

Left Wingers and religious mystics in one shapeless mass. The only common denominator is that all want national independence, and of course that's a fundamental bond of union, but there's no reason why a group of Indian parties representing genuine economic and mass interests should not combine for this purpose just as well together, just as all parties in your House of Commons support the war together. In England you don't have Lord Croft the Tory and Willie Gallagher the Communist pretending to see eye-to-eye politically. In India the craziest political bedfellows all call themselves 'Congressmen.' "

Of four I.C.S. men with whom I talked far into the night, one was a Parsee educated at Oxford, one was a Glasgow Scot, one was a Russian Jew with a high Oxford polish on him. Only one was the sort of Englishman which traditionally has run the Indian civil service in the past. But characteristically, the Jew was the best informed, the most surely grounded in Indian history and, incidentally, the most confident Imperialist of the lot. The very last flowering of our Imperialism—I can hear my nabob ancestors say.

They all struck me as earnest and hard-working young men, although they could not help suffering from a defect which increasingly impairs our whole Indian administration as the war prolongs itself—they were badly out of touch with trends at home. Of tendencies in Washington or Moscow, of course, they knew even less. There are very few European civilians in all India to-day, from the Viceroy down, who have been in a London blitz or seen anything of the active side of the war at all. This is a great misfortune. Men who have been in the only great section of the Orient untouched by war since 1939 have a 'dated' look to them. Thus it happens that British or American soldiers—the only class of person to move about the world in any numbers these days—often look at India with fresh, "United Nations" eyes, whilst governors of provinces, not having been in England since the Baldwin-Chamberlain era, handicap their vision with old, clouded spectacles.

Especially is this notable in the Indian Press, always a somewhat debilitated estate (whose editors are prone to be known as "Sir John" quite sometime before the King-Emperor gets around

to giving them the title), but to-day more than heretofore timid, tory and smug.

We may assume that a Bombay journal whose London correspondent is capable of suggesting to India that the "Common Wealth" party of Priestley and Sir Richard Acland is suspect because it is alleged to be financed by Eastern European Jews (shades of Disraeli and Sassoon !) is not a particularly disinterested interpreter of modern India either. This Press typifies a British India very largely cut off by the war from the development of the Western world. It is no accident that men who have never heard a bomb dropped or a shot fired (except in the suppression of Congress disturbances) should have but the haziest conception of the shape of the new Britain and United States which is being forged in the war's crucible.

In the years between the two wars, when the Western world certainly had little to teach India, our Indian administrators hastened home as soon as their holidays began and imbibed what cultural or sociological refreshment there was to be had in a London 'season' or a session on the Riviera. To-day, when Britain at war has really some profitable things to teach, they are driven, many for the first time, to spend their holidays in India.

This, in itself, might be a good thing if the average Indian hill station were a more representative place. I was amazed to find how many of our officials in India have scarcely budged outside their own particular province.

My brother-in-law, a valuable public servant in Bombay, grew quite wistful when I told him what I had seen in Karachi, Delhi and Calcutta in the course of a few weeks. He had spent a whole lifetime in India but had never been outside Bombay Presidency. Whenever he had leave, he wanted to join his wife and daughter who had usually preceded him home to England, and his post in the police gave him no facilities for travel while on the job. Now that officials are obliged to remain in India, could not the Government give them the inducement of cheapened fares to travel and see other provinces ? Going on holiday, my brother-in-law faced a two-day journey to southern Bombay second-class, because of the expense. He could not have afforded to take his wife to Delhi or Lahore.

Contrast this static situation with the record of a classic Indian administrator like General John Jacob ! Coming out from England in the eighteen twenties, Jacob served the East Indian Company for thirty years without a break until he died : although his fame rests on his conquests and colonisation in Sind, he travelled widely all over western India and campaigned in Persia. He never went home on leave. The result of his wholehearted devotion to India is that his name is still venerated in Sind after a manner which no modern I.C.S. man, snugly retired at Cheltenham, can ever hope to experience.

I don't think there can be any doubt that there has been a serious deterioration in the quality of Englishmen in India, especially since the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms twenty-five years ago, which convinced many who would otherwise have made their careers in India, that the hour was too late, that we were actually going to hand the country back to the Indians in the immediate future. And if our men are not superfine, our women are certainly not good enough. How painfully exact, as well as bitterly unkind, was the comment of the London novelist who, attending his first big party at which many Memsahibs were present, exclaimed, "*Now* I understand why there's such a shortage of domestic servants at home !"

The average Englishwomen in India is idle, mentally costive, physically unattractive and yet—such is the plethora of surplus men—quite absurdly conceited. The commonplace little flapper whom nobody noticed in Ealing becomes the belle of the ball in Ootacamund. Her sole distinction lies in being a *rara avis*. How she knows it, and capitalises upon it !

At the Bombay races one sees a gaggle of Memsahibs in coats and skirts or absurd, ill-cut garden party dresses—imitation jewellery, machine-made lace hanging in inappropriate places, picture hats like wilting toadstools . . . a raggle-taggle of most unappetising femininity. Yet with what arrogance do they parade and with what condescension do they bow to acquaintances among the real queens of the day—the Hindu and Parsee ladies, in their beautiful sarees and magnificent jewels, whose manners and elegance are vastly superior to their own. Strict control is exercised by the police to prevent European women 'going



native' or lowering the prestige of the white race. But I say it is the Memsahib—not the occasional English prostitute—who fatally lowers our prestige in India.

Some young British officers of my acquaintance took a vow never more to go out with Memsahibs but to seek the company of Indian girls, or where that was not possible, then Chinese or Burmese.

The Indian problem is so complex that only the best brains are good enough to wrestle with it. And with the emergence of Indian women into politics, we need the best type of Englishwomen in that field too. With some noteworthy exceptions, we haven't got the best talent at our disposal. I have met some members of the Viceroy's Executive Council: they were not the calibre of man who could hold down a post in the British Cabinet. Nor is the big Calcutta business man, on the whole, the type who could hold a comparable job in the city of London. Our best brains have been staying away from India for the last generation or two and the dangerous usage has grown up that, somehow, the *second* best is good enough for India. I may be accused of snobbery if I assert that whereas in times past the administrators of India came from the English countryhouse and parsonage, they now derive mainly from the suburban villa, and that this is not a forward step. If India were really being run by the best types which the democratic process throws up, well and good. But the "Little Men," the men of 'refainment' from the petty public schools seem to be on the job, and these places are not nurseries of democracy. The vigour of the British working-class is not represented in India except in the private soldiers of the army. The prevailing tone of British life in India reflects the suburban tennis club, it is the life of the petty bourgeoisie that we now set before the Indian as an example—not the pattern of the trades union or the comradeship of the factory. And the Indian has shown quite plainly that he despises this pattern, that he wants none of it. Our old pattern of example was aristocratic and had to be superseded. But we have not gone far enough in seeking its antithesis. To-day you see the bank clerk playing at being proconsul.

So much for our own shortcomings. On the Indian side there

are also serious deficiencies. What does the educated Indian want? (Only 11 per cent of British India, or 30 million at most form the electorate.) He wants Dominion status with the immediate option of leaving the Empire if he feels like it. Then why hasn't he got it after some fifty years of political agitation? The answer lies, I feel, largely in his own failure as a politician. It would not be possible for the very commonplace Englishmen now administering India to continue to pit their wits successfully against the often far more astute Indian in the game of government unless that Indian, like a careless tennis player, kept on giving his opponent points by serving 'doubles.'

Some say: "There is too much politics in India." But surely the contrary is the case. There is not nearly enough politics. But far too much religion. In other countries the Congress would be a straightforward Nationalist movement. But in India, under Gandhi, Congress is caught up in a vast, religious spider's web of its own spinning. The Congress is dominated by orthodox Hinduism which, although it is the majority religion of the country, clashes as violently with technical progress and social reform as the Roman Church clashed with the early discoveries of science. Gandhi is the fountainhead of this religious domination, to which even Nehru and the Congress Socialists have to bow. And behind Gandhi, the conservative, the mystic who hates the Machine Age through which alone India can progress, stand the big Hindu industrialists and millowners—men as rapacious and reactionary as any European capitalist who ever batted on the Indian masses. These men find Gandhi ideal as the leader of a national movement entirely without revolutionary risk to their enterprises. Let Gandhi fool about with his spinning wheel, say they: it can never supplant the cotton mill based on cheap Indian labour. But once the Europeans are thrown out of the country, Indian industry will forge ahead behind a tariff wall and, with its cheap labour, be in a position to dump and export cheaply all over the world, as the Japanese were able to do before the war. Gandhi will have served their purpose if he can secure the withdrawal of the British. Then it will be for the industrialists to choose a new leader, perhaps a 'tough guy' like Bose, the exile in Berlin who talks over the Nazi radio, to

prevent the Nehru socialists from ever getting control of the party.

In Turkey Mustafa Kemal had to break the chains of religion before he could modernise his country. Even Reza Shah in Persia had to war on the mullahs before he could build roads and the railway. In Russia Lenin did the same. In China, Sun Yat Sen promulgated his own principles to re-energise a people weakened by religious *laissez-faire*. But the unfortunate Indians have been trying to win freedom under the leadership of the very Pope of the Hindu world, the *eminence grise* through whose magic personality the archaic religious practices which are the root of much of India's unnecessary suffering are being strengthened and perpetuated. No wonder they have not got very far. They call him their 'Buddha.' They glory in his boundless religiosity, his lack of practical worldliness.

Don't they realise that to win freedom in the modern world a Lenin, not a saint, is what they need?

It has been our pride that we have never interfered with the multifarious religions of India, except to put down 'Suttee,' the compulsory hari-kari for widows. To-day it seems a pity we did not interfere, while the going was good. Now it's too late to reverse our policy. But suppose the U.S.S.R. had been saddled with responsibility for India, is it not certain that she would have placed a firm hand on those religious practices which manifestly stand in the way of India's transformation into a modern state?

India is reputed to have five million religious mendicants. Stalin would make them work. She has an enormous cattle population, largely starved and unproductive for dairying, whose slaughter and use for food is forbidden by religion whilst the dung of these animals is squandered as fuel, to the consequent impoverishment of the soil. Stalin would make the Hindu eat cow, and like it.

The Indian peasant is oppressed by Hindu moneylenders who mortgage his land and his labour for years ahead upon fantastic rates of interest—as much as 70 or 80 per cent. Stalin would make short work of the Bunya class which we, after two centuries in India, still tolerate.

One can see Stalin and Gandhi united on one point—the

removal of untouchability. Then one pictures Stalin going on to make the observance of Caste restrictions a crime punishable with severe penalties.

Stalin the Georgian has dealt successfully with the great Oriental populations within his own territory. Wherever religious practice stood in the way of modernisation, he threw religious practice overboard. We can imagine how he would deal with a political Pope like Gandhi or with communal bigots like the Hindu Mahasabha. Neither Stalin nor Ataturk would stand for many of the basic practices of Hinduism, practices which a Hindu Raj would perpetuate if it could. But we know that so long as Gandhi lives, he will dominate the Congress ; and that so long as he does so, those fundamental tenets of Hinduism which form great barriers against the march of progress will never be pulled down.

So I agree with the young Congressman who said that Gandhi's death was a political necessity.

To-day Congress demands full independence and boggles at Dominion status, although Dominion status " of the statute of Westminster variety " certainly carries with it the right to secede. Congress thinks we would withdraw the right to secede at the last moment. But I cannot see why they should not take dominion status, and then go on from there. The only test of British sincerity, after all, would be to pass a bill of secession in the Parliament of the Dominion of India. Then see what happened.

Maybe with a Congress government in power, India would enact such a bill at the first opportunity. Or maybe not. Eire hasn't. Although perhaps, if the emerald island could but be towed southward and anchored off Catholic Spain, she would do so. But India would have as much to gain from joint Commonwealth defence as Eire has from Anglo-American safeguarding to-day. And if the United Nations stay united after the war, one cannot see an independent India preferring isolation to membership of so powerful a bloc.

For the moment, the political deadlock is complete. But this cannot possibly endure—much as some of our stand-pat civil servants would like it to.

"See how peaceful the country is, with Congress out of the way," one such said to me. I saw in his eye the hope that this nirvana might continue indefinitely. But although we could win the war with Congress still under lock and key, I do not think we could win the peace in such a fashion.

The inanity of our stand-patters is matched on the other side by an increased irresponsibility among the Congress. Like Jews whose faults have been conditioned by their sufferings, Congressmen—through being constantly in opposition—are developing a dangerous 'opposition' neurosis. One feels they simply must be given responsibility soon, or a day will come when they will no longer be capable of exercising it. Many of them, I think, are beginning to regret that they rejected the Cripps proposals—mainly on the issue of defence. Would it really have been so terrible to have had an Indian Defence Minister who might, upon occasion, have been overruled by Field-Marshal Wavell? After all, one may be sure that the chief of the British Imperial General Staff is sometimes overruled by the American Defence chiefs.

As to the Congress objection that the proposed Constitution-making body was not democratic because it would contain certain non-representative elements, and that ninety million Indians in the States would remain disfranchised and treated as 'commodities' by their rulers—this was playing with words. India is a great mass of non-representative and undemocratic elements. A beginning has to be made somewhere. Only 12 per cent of Indians are literate. Over 80 per cent are peasant farmers whose primary business is just keeping alive. Politics is the sport of the minority of the well-fed, and Congress itself does not claim more than five million members in a country of nearly 400 millions. The whole set-up in India is non-democratic from top to bottom and it would be perfectly easy for Congress to go on indefinitely rejecting British proposals on the ground that this or that suggestion did not provide for immediate democracy.

Were Congress to come to power to-morrow it might well be quarter of a century before it could get working a reasonably comprehensive democracy as we know it in the West. So that often one suspects that Congress "doth protest too much,"

perhaps because it does not *want* to assume responsibility in India at the present very difficult juncture?

In any event, it is not going to get the opportunity at the moment. After its victory in the Battle of Sweet Limes, the government does not appear to be disposed to yield an inch.

Travelling back to Delhi in the air-conditioned luxury of the "Frontier Mail," I bought the Delhi newspapers at a Rajah's private railway station in Rajputana and they were weighted down with self-righteousness and stand-pattism.

While peacocks strutted in the neighbouring fields, matching their elegance against that of the ivory-coloured train and sacred monkeys frolicked up and down its roof, I read that the Viceroy had rejected the request for Gandhi's unconditional release by the meeting of non-Congress leaders in Bombay. It looks as though they want Gandhi to give a pledge not only not to hamper the war effort but also to condemn retrospectively the policy of violence which was put through after his arrest last August. For this he claims he was not responsible, but the government, having published its White Book which pins the blame clearly on Gandhi and the Congress, would like him to substantiate its case as the price of his own freedom. This he is most unlikely to do. Or suppose he does write a fresh letter to the Viceroy? Linlithgow may publish it or not, as he pleases. Technically, there is no reason why the government should not be able to keep Gandhi in gaol until the end of the war, *even if he should recant*. One misses, more than anything else in India, a Supreme Court. The Viceroy's actions ought to be subject to legal review, especially when Habeas Corpus has been suspended.

Although I don't think Gandhi *ought* to be released unconditionally, I doubt whether the government would risk much in so doing because, after all, violence as a political weapon has been tried and found wanting. Whether or not Congress carried out the sabotage and political assassinations last autumn, many thousands of Indians who *did* resort to these methods have had time to reflect that if they won no political advantage then, they could scarcely do so to-day. The police force and army which suppressed the disturbances then are even stronger to-day and ahead looms the prospect of ever-growing United Nations strength

in India, bearing in mind Churchill's pledge that when the Axis is overthrown in Europe, armies will be moved out here to polish off the Japanese. So it would seem that to reaffirm non-violence as the chief plank in its platform would be for Congress the mere recognition of a political reality.

Two factors may presently induce a spirit of compromise among the imprisoned Congress leaders ; one is the growth of the Moslem League and the other is the growth of the realisation that it might be poor tactics for Congress to pursue a policy which would lead to all its leaders still being locked up at a time when the Allies win the war and start making the peace.

Two years ago the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan seemed to most Hindus mere moonshine, but now the legislature of one province (Sind) has actually voted in favour of Pakistan and the Moslem League, due chiefly to Congress' self-immolation, dominates the political stage and wins converts upon a scale a minority organisation could not normally hope to do. A good many Congressmen must by now recognise the folly of not being present when the new world is being made at the peace conference and upon the pace of their progress towards an accommodation that would end the political deadlock we may judge how long they think the war's going to last. Right now it would seem they believe the peace conference is still a comfortable distance away. But the collapse of German arms in Europe might produce a bewilderingly rapid switch of attitude here.

Not, however, if Mohandas K. Gandhi is still in control. I cannot believe that we in the West will ever be able to reach a final understanding with this great and charming saint (but most incompetent politician). If Cripps had had Nehru to negotiate with, I believe his proposals might have been accepted. I know that Nehru *wanted* to accept them. But Cripps found himself dealing with a Congress working committee dominated so completely by Gandhi, that, after the talks broke down, it could vote a resolution so wildly impractical as to demand the immediate evacuation of India by the British, after which India, if she failed to come to terms with the Japanese, would defend herself against aggression.

This was not the voice of Nehru and young India. It was

pure, undiluted Gandhism. And for Gandhi, "defence against aggression" meant non-violent resistance. The Japanese, in other words, were to be allowed to come into the country.

Can history conceive of Lenin, Ataturk or Sun Yat Sen, in comparable circumstances, laying down such a policy?

No. But then Mohandas K. Gandhi is not a great revolutionary leader.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### SNAKES IN THE PERSIAN GARDEN

TO DELHI my foreign editor had cabled asking me to go to replace Paul Holt in Moscow. With typical exuberance Charles Foley, at urgent rates, instructed : "Rush Teheranwards." Then he followed up with details about the visa, which he was trying to arrange with the Soviet Ambassador in London. But knowing something about Soviet visas and how to get them, I set off for Persia, prepared for a nice long wait in Teheran.

And I was not disappointed. That visa took two months in the getting. However, that gave me the opportunity to start this book and to renew my acquaintance with a country which had fascinated me in my first visit a year before.

I left India by the way I had come—on the flying boat through the Persian Gulf. On board was a very young brigadier of Combined Operations. I had never met him before, yet somehow his personality was vaguely familiar. He turned out to be an old friend of my sister's, who before the war had been a regular subaltern of traditional impecuniosity but with a real ability, for the full recognition of which he must stand indebted to Adolf Hitler. He was one of a number of young men making great careers in the army for whom this war has been an Open Sesame to life. And in the unsettled times which are likely to continue all over the world for at least a decade after the armistice, there will surely be great openings for talents such as these.

At Bahrein a familiar face loomed up in the launch. It was Bob Landry, the *Life* photographer, fresh from a trip right across Saudi Arabia in a motorcade lent him by King Ibn Saud. Two men of his party had been killed when their truck turned over in a rough place, but they had made the whole journey from Jeddah in nine days.

I don't know that such journeys *prove* anything, unless it be

the oft-demonstrated fact that the world has become absurdly small. But, with a good camera to record everything that happens and place it all upon a more secure plane than mere traveller's memory, they must be great fun to make.

At Habbaniyeh I left the flying-boat and, motoring a couple of miles away from the lake, took a Lockheed Hudson plane on the R.A.F. airfield to go up to Teheran. In the winter and spring the 540 miles between Habbaniyeh and the Persian capital can be a dangerous hop. And this one was no exception. I was advised to get out of my khaki drill, although Habbaniyeh was sweltering, because we were going to fly high, and half an hour later I was glad of my thick uniform, my gloves and fleece-lined coat.

Climbing to 17,000 feet to clear the mountains about Hamadan, we ran into extremely cold weather. The snow-covered peaks lay below us. The windows of the plane frosted up until one could only see out by scraping a pinpoint on the glass with a knife. The motors seemed to labour through the rarefied air. But we zoomed along at 220 miles an hour, with a tail wind.

I had now reached a stage in my peregrinations about the East when I was liable to meet old friends wherever I went. That is a pleasant feeling—if apt to make one rather conceited. At Habbaniyeh I met a Polish officer friend who told me that his room at the Hotel Rey was at my disposal. And when I got to Teheran, there was John Wallis of Reuters on the airport and Leo Herman of the Associated Press at the Ferdowsi Hotel. Wallis had married the daughter of the Persian Foreign Minister and lived with his in-laws in the Foreign Office—a situation which must actually have been rather embarrassing for a keen news man. Herman and his charming Viennese wife lived in an old house with blue walls and a patio in the Avenue Nadiri : until the Nazis drove him out of Central Europe, Herman had covered that pleasant territory for *Paris-Soir* and had been one of the best-liked and most knowledgeable of all French correspondents in that area.

Teheran was terribly cold : snow still lay on the ground just outside the town.

I found that the country had undergone a most painful and grievous change since my last visit. The British troops were with-

drawing towards Syria and the American Service of Supply was taking over. Under General Connolly the Persian Gulf Service Command had been set up to run the whole supply route to Russia. Nine American advisers had been imported to try to redress the economic situation of the country: their recommendations, involving some measure of control over the big middlemen and landlords, who were holding food off the market against a rise in prices, were being resisted by these men themselves—many of whom were members of parliament. Shops were loaded with goods, but the poor were in danger of starvation.

Whilst British and American seamen at the risk of their lives had been bringing wheat into Persia which was sold to the Persian Government at from £23 to £25 a ton, Persian profiteers had been hoarding their own crops, then selling them on the black market at £75 per ton and even more.

This was the basic scandal in an economic situation full of scandals which had not only caused distress among Persia's sixteen million inhabitants, but had also imperilled the security of a country which was growing more important every day as a supply channel to Russia, and whose stability was therefore a vital interest of all the United Nations.

In April, after much vacillation, the Majliss (Persian Parliament) took the first steps towards stopping the rot by granting emergency powers over prices and the purchase and sale of commodities to the American Director-General of Finance, Dr. Millspaugh (who performed a similar task in Persia twenty-five years ago). On paper these powers are sweeping, but it remains to be seen whether the entrenched interests will not prove strong enough to prevent Dr. Millspaugh from cleaning up the mess.

Because she was perhaps the only country closely affected by the war which imposed no measures against inflation, Persia has experienced in chronic form the "vicious spiral" against which the British people have so often been warned.

Eight months earlier Persia was still one of the fortunate countries of the East but, following a poor harvest and a shortage of transport to distribute food stocks over her vast mountain territories, hoarders and grafters stepped in to take advantage of the situation and succeeded in the space of a few months in

running the prices first of necessities, then of luxuries, upwards until the cost of living was estimated at 500 per cent above pre-war level.

Persia has no national savings scheme, no subsidies to keep food prices down, there are few fixed prices for any goods and, where there are, black marketeers get away unpunished.

Here are typical prices in Teheran in April, 1943 :

£500 for one motor tyre.

£10,000 for a Buick car 18 months old.

£75 for a Swiss watch priced £20 in Cairo.

Thirty shillings for a portable-typewriter ribbon.

£160 for a Persian carpet priced £30 eight months ago.

Eighteen shillings for 1 lb. of chocolate.

£4 a day for hire of car and driver to British military authorities (daily distance limited to 40 miles).

£64 a month for small bungalow and garden in bad repair.

£4 a week for two-room flat without bathroom.

£8000 freehold for a week-end cottage in hills ten miles from Teheran

Six shillings for the simplest, standard meal.

Ten shillings for a measure of gin.

Three and sixpence for an ice-cream.

Four shillings for a loaf of white bread.

I was offered £50 on the nail for my fourteen-year-old Remington typewriter and £10 for a pair of army boots that cost me thirty shillings.

Repeatedly in recent months the Allies advised the Persian Government to set its house in order. Under the Anglo-Russo-Persian treaty the Persian Government retains full sovereignty and, save through the handful of American advisers employed by the government, the Allies have no say in the administration of the country.

The Allies have brought wheat and seeds into the country, but the control of prices and the punishment of speculators were matters purely in Persian control, and in this respect many of the ruling classes set a shocking example. Leading families went into

the black market and the original black market operators mixed in the best circles. Landowners hoarded food. M.P.s cornered commodities.

A young Teheran bachelor, complaining to an Englishwoman at a dinner-party that it cost him £120 a month to run a modest flat, said, "So I just sell a ton and a half of wheat to pay the bill."

Persia's absentee landlords deplore the swing to the Left among the small officials and professional men, but their own selfish attitude encourages it. Their motto is: "Noblesse Exige." I have seen their walled, feudal villages and nothing could be easier than to transform them into collective farms.

Speculators who a short distance away across the Soviet border would be shot as traitors, flaunt their wealth in Teheran, which is full of smart American cars. The shops and bazaars are piled high with foods. But the poor cannot buy. Save for the profiteers, the prices are impossible.

In a restaurant run by Irantour, the official hotel trust, the doors were locked one night after the curfew hour and a group of wealthy merchants took over the place and ran it on the lines of a London bottle party into the early hours of the morning. One merchant hired the band,<sup>1</sup> another ordered French champagne at £7 a bottle, a third provided the supper.

A great deal of champagne was drunk. Yes, I stayed behind with them! One of the hosts wanted me to "write something that will help Persia—get questions asked in the House of Commons."

"Things cannot go on like this," he confided. "There will be a revolution . . . a revolution from *above*, of course. Our *poor* people—they suffer so. Can you not do something to help them? Here, let me give you some more champagne."

At last parliament has acted. A bumper harvest promises this year and Allied wheat is still coming in so—thanks in great part to our seamen—the remaining hoarders will have to disgorge. Normally, Persia feeds herself and has a wheat surplus for export.

But when the Minister of State in the Middle East, Mr. Casey, was here he indulged in some straight talking. He told the Persians that they cannot hope to escape all the consequences of the war and be spoon-fed by the Allies. He told them that when

wealthy America rationed herself and taxed the rich severely, there was no reason why Persia should not do the same. He told them that with 120,000 motor trucks needed in the desert to win Montgomery's victory, it was wrong for Persians to say : " Why can't the Allies import this and that for us ? " Rather, they should study self-sufficiency.

Persia now has the forms of democracy but has yet to acquire the spirit. And the very profiteers who were battenning on her were able to grow rich, evade unpopularity and do Doktor Goebbel's work for him at the same time by saying : " Admittedly, things are bad ; and it's this new-fangled Democracy the Allies are so keen on that's to blame."

Only the Persians can make Democracy work in Persia but the Allies, who will assuredly be blamed if they fail, are encouraging M. Ali Soheily's government to 'crack down' as hard as it can on the Snakes in natty business suits who have been polluting the Persian Garden.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### HITLER'S LAST BLOW AT MOSCOW

I BELIEVE that three decisive events marked the land fighting in the second World War against Germany. The first was Stalingrad, the second el Alamein and the third was the German offensive on the Kursk Salient which began on July 5th, 1943. These three battles were turning-points in the course of the war because, had they been won by the Germans instead of by the Russians and British, the enemy would in each case have reached a goal which he had long set himself, would have won a tremendous strategic advantage and added such booty and potential wealth to his spoils as to make himself more nearly invincible after these battles than he had been before them.

Had von Paulus won at Stalingrad, the Germans would have crossed the Volga on to the Kirgiz Steppe and been free to sweep north upon Kuibyshev and even to cut off Moscow from the war industries in the Urals ; had Alamein been lost by us, the enemy would have seized the Suez Canal, cut off our thin battalions in Iraq and Persia from the even thinner detachments in the Sudan and East Africa and probably have effected a junction with the Japanese Fleet in the Indian Ocean. And had Hitler won at Kursk, he would have been in a position to reverse the verdict of Stalingrad and swing north upon Moscow, threatening to cut European Russia off from the supply bases in the Urals even more surely and rapidly than through the Stalingrad plan. The Kursk plan indeed envisaged the seizure of Moscow, as captured documents showed : it was essentially the Stalingrad plan over again, improved and tightened up, and had it worked, the terrible Russian sacrifices at Stalingrad would have been made in vain, for the Germans would have won substantially the same result only six months after they had appeared to lose the initiative altogether.

So far as I know, no man was present at all three of these

decisive battles. But I was fortunate enough to be present at two of them—that is to say, having gone all through Alamein, I spent four months in the Soviet Union over the period of the Kursk offensive and the Soviet counter-offensive which grew directly out of the German attack, and I saw as much of these battles as it is possible for any foreigner to do—which is to say, by the standards of British or American war correspondence, mighty little. One is not, unfortunately, accredited to the Red Army as a war correspondent but rather to the Soviet Foreign Office as a Moscow correspondent and one visits the front as the guest of the Army at the request of the Foreign Office—a very different thing from being directly a part of an army in the field, as I had been in France, in Africa, in Burma.

A Russian correspondent with an Allied army in the West would see far more of the fighting than an Allied correspondent on the Eastern front ; this is partly due to the secrecy with which the Russians surround all their military affairs and partly an inevitable result of the circumstance that, each paper having but one correspondent in Russia, that individual could not in any case afford to be purely a war correspondent, living all the time at the front, because so much news 'breaks' in Moscow which is not available at the front and he must report Soviet political events as well as the progress of the Red Army. He must also be on hand lest some famous Allied personality pop up unannounced in the Soviet capital, as has happened more than once. It is not safe to absent oneself from Moscow for long. Something interesting is always going on there. One felt that Moscow was steadily becoming the most important capital on the European continent and would in future have to be 'covered' as closely as Paris was before 1939.

It was supremely lucky that in those short four months, before going home on leave, so many decisive events took place which I was able to observe, if not from the wings, at least from a good seat in the stalls. In common with every other non-Russian observer in the U.S.S.R., I never saw the Red Army actually fighting the Germans, but I followed up fairly closely on its heels, saw the physical results of its victories on the field and the political results in Moscow and I was able to talk with Russian soldiers



at the front and with Russian civilians in the rear, both when things were bad and faces long before the German blow fell and during the electrifying summer evenings when the guns and rockets of Moscow lit the sky night after night to celebrate fresh victories.

I was lucky to go to Baku and Kuibyshev and some wooded villages around Moscow ; to visit Tula and Tolstoy's home at Yasnaya Polyanna and the ancient town of Mtsensk whence came the " Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk " of Shostakovich's opera, to see Orel and the terrible atrocities there, to visit Bielgorod and Voronezh and Valuiki and Kharkov and thence onward into the Ukrainian countryside with the Army of General Koniev and finally to leave Russia by way of Stalingrad and Astrakhan.

Two months before the German offensive began, while I was yet waiting in Teheran for my visa to come through, it was evident from the remarks of the Red Army men there that great events were in preparation. On May 10th the Soviet censor in Persia even allowed me to send a cable which began : " A great Soviet offensive, perhaps more powerful than any seen hitherto, is about to be unleashed. It may not necessarily come where the Germans expect it—on the Orel front—but come it certainly will and that soon." With a nice sense of timing the Russians seem to have engineered their offensive so as to " keep the ball rolling " after the Allied victory in North Africa.

The rupture of relations between the Kremlin and the refugee Polish Government in London took on a new perspective in the light of the prospect ahead, for who could say where the Red Army might not stand when that summer's campaign was over ? The Soviet Government had given its reasons for being dissatisfied over the unfriendly attitude of the Polish Government : from the Russian point of view, it was obviously desirable to bring these differences to light before beginning operations which might bring the Red Army closer to the old Polish frontiers than at any time in the preceding two years. And the Kremlin had given notice that the Polish Government as then constituted did not seem to it to be a body with whom it could conduct the inevitable negotiations and adjustments which Victory in the East would bring.

It was June 13th when I took off in the Douglas plane with the big red star upon it for Baku. It had a cargo of blood plasma given by men and women of South Africa and flown all the way from Capetown. A very bumpy flight over the mountains of Mazanderan did not prevent me from reaching a state of high excitement over the prospect of seeing the Soviet Union for the first time.

I had become a Marxist in America before the war ; and the struggle in Spain, the Munich Agreement and the whole course of policy followed in these years by the Western Powers, had convinced me not only that the fundamental assumptions of Marx in regard to Imperialism and Capitalism in Decline were being proven correct, year by year, before our very eyes but also that what the Russians call "Marxism-Leninism" was proving as sound a guide to Stalin in the conduct of foreign policy as it had been in transforming backward Russia into the strongest state in Europe.

I was, I hope, too good a Marxist to be merely "pro-Russian." I felt that Marxism in, for example, New Zealand, would show finer results more rapidly than in Russia, on account of the more polished human potential which that small Dominion can show, when compared with a sprawling, partly-Oriental empire. I had not been particularly pleased by individual Russians I had met. I was not a lover of Russian culture in the way in which Francophiles 'adore' the French way of life. I certainly did not expect to see an earthly Paradise in the U.S.S.R. Nor was I disappointed. For Russia in the first half of 1943 was a nation stretched to the limit of endurance and beyond, suffering greater privations even than Occupied France or Norway, yet fortified by martial pride and the hope of deliverance to come.

I was proof against the silly Old Guard type of reasoning which seeks to show that because Russian towns are made of wood, that because the Russian masses never have and do not now eat as well or as cheaply as the British artisan or because the Russian peasant still likes going without his boots in summer—*ergo*, that proves to poor deluded Socialists everywhere that Marxism is No Good ! I well knew that no Russian in his right mind had ever claimed that Russia was a Communist State

(though many hoped it would one day evolve into one). Recognising that, in politics as in life, you get nothing without paying for it, I knew that a dictatorship of the Proletariat is a high price to pay for the modernisation of one's country ; but I felt that the stability and cohesion of the Russian people after the great Purges and after two years of a war whose fortunes had gone steadily against them showed that, if the price were high, the benefits were correspondingly great.

Unlike some Liberals who enter Russia wearing rose-tinted spectacles and leave it with dark glasses covering their streaming eyes, I had tried to prepare myself by reading for what I was going to see. I was not, of course, a Liberal, but a Marxist : so I stayed away from the endless bibliography of journalistic stuff, pro and con, but read as much as I could of Marx himself, of Lenin and the speeches of Stalin and Litvinov. Especially Stalin, and *in extenso*, when his utterances take on a singular clarity. You then realise how misleading (perhaps deliberately so ?) were the scrappy summaries of his speeches which the British papers used to print before the war. You realise that their author is a genius—not with the florid oratory of a Churchill—but with the extreme simplicity of a technician presenting a report on highly complex economic matters in such a way that it will be understood as readily by an Uzbek peasant as by a scientist in Leningrad.

It would not be at all boastful to say that I entered Russia much better prepared for what lay before me than the generality of British Statesmen who have dealt with Russia this past quarter of a century. On the contrary, many a journalist as unimportant as I had flown this route before me in a like state. One can only conclude from the almost inconceivable ineptitude of Western statesmen *vis-à-vis* Russia before this war, the unbelievable ignorance which one could see them displaying on occasions like the World Economic Conference (to name just one such at which I was present) that these gentlemen's acquaintance with political economy had halted at John Stuart Mill and that their understanding of contemporary Russian history had ossified about the period of Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* and Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*. If they could not comprehend what Lenin *did*, could they not at least have read a little of what he *wrote* ? But plainly,

they cannot have taken out even so low an insurance against political incapacity *or they would not so conspicuously have blundered.* One cannot so much complain that our relations with Russia before the war were bedevilled by reactionaries as that these reactionaries didn't even give themselves a chance to succeed because they were either too stupid or too conceited to *study the other side.* It is as though Burke and Fox had formed judgments upon the French Revolution without even thumbing through Rousseau or Voltaire.

A slight study of Soviet foreign policy, for example, would have prevented these people from being thrown completely off their balance by the Finnish war and from allowing themselves to be bamboozled by the always-meaningless formula—"Big Bully Attacks Brave Little Nation without Cause." I viewed the Finnish war from the inside of the Finnish Legation in London, where I assisted every day at those press conferences through which the Finnish Minister had no difficulty in reviving the old Sovietophobia and Red Mania of the British Press. Fascinated, I watched the reporters' pencils filling their notebooks with unsubstantiated assertions as to the brutality and incompetence of the Red Army. I watched learned Military Correspondents who now write in such laudatory terms of the Red Army, noting, with the 'evident relish' with which Lord Woolton might polish off a Woolton pie, that the Russian staff was committing errors of which a third-rate general staff would not be guilty. I saw reporters committing to paper an eulogy of Field-Marshal Baron Mannerheim which presented that fervent admirer of Hitler in the guise of a Grand Old Man of English Liberal tendencies. I read the impassioned appeal which one news agency received from its war correspondent in Finland (a fine sports reporter, incidentally, but like so many Big Names at Westminster, evidently quite unaware of those Necessities which have shaped the modern Soviet State): an appeal which called upon the British people to make war upon godless, vandal Russia without further delay. (Mercifully for us all and for the lives of millions of our best, this appeal was never published and others like it were not heeded.)

I saw the kind of young men who were being recruited at the

neighbouring house in Smith Square to fight against Russia—some just soldiers of fortune, others the type who used to march with Mosley through the East End—and my heart sank at the thought of the abyss which was opening before us. Fortunately I was then working for Reuters which, serving newspapers of every colour throughout the world, has positively no interest in one-sided propaganda : so I was free to stick to the facts, which were these—the Red Army, after sending some ‘ token ’ divisions across the Finnish border under the misguided impression that they would be welcomed as ‘ liberators ’ by a wide section of the people, thus ensuring that Hitler would not be able to use Finland as a loaded pistol pressed to the temples of Leningrad, retrieved their initial political blunder and steadily began to crumple up the Mannerheim Line. The result was never for a moment in doubt. I was extremely sorry for the people of Finland. I regretted that Russia could not win bases against Germany without resort to violence and I felt that her diplomacy *ought* certainly not to have landed her in a position which made her enemies in every land rejoice. But I had no doubts as to the *necessity*, one way or another, of preventing Mannerheim from giving Hitler a flying start, when the time came, only twenty miles from the city of Leningrad ; nor had I any doubts as to what *we* would have done if, knowing that Hitler was going to attack us, we had also known that de Valera planned to deliver up Eire to him. The Finnish war was, perhaps, Russia’s Boer War : perhaps it was a sad but unavoidable necessity ; but its object was far more vital to Russia, and subsequently to Britain and America, than our quarrel with Kruger had ever been.

And so, when the Interventionist clamour in England reached its peak and the danger of war between Russia and ourselves seemed most grave, I had the opportunity to write for Reuters a piece which, as I afterwards discovered, did a little good. It was sent to Moscow ; it appeared in papers there and in many other papers, all over the world. It stated quite simply that unless an early and a generous peace could be arranged between Russia and Finland there was danger of a collision between Russia and the Western Powers which would be fatal to the best interests of all ; it said that the best friends of Russia in England hoped for

an early peace, with Russia's vital interests and Finland's independence both safeguarded, and that only the enemies of the Soviet Union in the West hoped for a prolongation of the war. This cable was regarded in Russia and elsewhere as bearing the seal of official approval.

I mention this past history merely to lay my antecedents before the reader. From it he will see that I went to Russia a prejudiced man, like every other man who has ever gone there, including the Archbishop of York who, quite delightfully exclaimed over the B.B.C on his return, "I was much struck . . . to see the streets simply *filled* with working-class people!" He will see what my prejudices were and may judge whether they were reasonably well founded. For a detailed picture of Russia during 1943 there is no space in this volume. I can but tell of what I saw and heard from day to day.

There exists a vast repository of *opinions* about Russia, nearly all formed before the war. The sort of people who form set opinions after a month's visit have not received Soviet visas at all since the war—only war reporters and technicians have been admitted. Whence comes that restful ease we now feel at the absence from the publishers' lists of all those turgid tales of adventures on Intourist Tours by the Trotskyite professors from New England and sociological bores of every persuasion, no less *pro* than *con*.

To this literature of Opinion I have not the space, even had I the inclination, to add more than a brief summing-up of how matters stood in Moscow when I left for home, late in 1943. This may possess some scarcity-value, for the number of Englishmen or Americans who have lived in Russia and visited the Russian front since the war began is extraordinarily few; of those trained in any degree to observe and report, there have been scarcely more than a score.

Whether one comes to Russia well prepared or ill, there is a sense of wonder and curiosity inseparable from first setting foot in a country that is radically different from all others which I believe is felt by every one. The approach through Baku is ugly : oil derricks cover the low, yellowish hills for miles around ; there

are few trees and except where the Caspian pleases the eye with its vivid blue, Baku seems drained of all colour.

No sooner had the aircraft come to rest than mechanics ran forward to check it over ; each one was a woman and speedily got down to the heavy and dirty work of cleaning and refuelling the 'plane. The customs people were all women too ; so were the 'despatchers' with flags who direct the traffic on the airport.

I was wearing British uniform and perhaps for this reason fared very well at the hands of the customs girls who scarcely looked at my bags or at my books and papers, although they waded through a bundle of letters from my wife with some interest. Their English was good, one of them having lived in America.

The passengers—Major Birse of the British Embassy in Moscow, the King's Messenger and his 'security man' and a couple of Russian officers from Teheran—piled into a motor bus which was in its ultimate dotage (the King's Messenger said he had used it man and boy for fifteen years) and we rattled into the city over a road which wound its way through the oilfields for nearly thirty miles.

Baku struck me as dreary and grey : an industrial town in which you felt they were so busy extracting the last drop of oil from the ground that they had no energy left to beautify their homes or streets. But the Intourist Hotel was good—some call it the best in Russia. We were each given a small sitting-room and bedroom with private bath and a balcony looking out over the harbour. The manageress, a Moscow lady of the old school, exchanged badinage with the 'security man' in excellent French. Later she served us a dinner of steak and onions, with caviare and Caucasian wine and preserved cherries and coffee. And of course we began with vodka.

Next day we emplaned before dawn and after a rapid flight of six hours, came down at Kuibyshev, which was still the official capital for the Diplomatic Corps and for some of the government departments too, although the Government itself had never left Moscow, even in the darkest days of November, 1941, when German tanks actually reached the outer suburbs of the city, but then—not realising how nearly Moscow was within their grasp

—withdrew some miles to await reinforcements, which came up too late. (For this lack of judgment General Guderain himself was said to be responsible.)

Flying hour after hour over the rolling farmlands which look so like the American Middle West, the infinity of Russia was impressed upon one with greater force than if one was gazing at the largest-scale map. One realised afresh the insanity that must rattle the brains of the Bohemian corporal to suppose that any one could ever seize and assimilate so much vastness. Great oblongs of fresh-ploughed land stretched for miles in length. No hedges stood in the way of the all-conquering tractor transforming the steppe into food-bearing land, to replace the lost wheatlands of the Ukraine.

We flew over one particularly large aircraft works with dozens of new planes lined up on the tarmac outside awaiting test flights. The whole factory appeared to be brand new. On another landing-ground we came to I counted no fewer than 200 British fighter planes, besides many Russian. I asked one of the Soviet officers whether he did not think their dispersal might be better. He agreed, but added with a smile : " Many planes on one field means tight packing—yes ? " There really seemed to be more aircraft in these parts than the local people had room to handle.

The plane filled up at Kuibyshev with civil servants bound for Moscow. While we waited there, we went into a little shed on the airport and had some tea, a couple of boiled eggs and bread ; there was no butter or sugar, but we had things that tasted like dates with chocolate coating to suck, which sweetened the tea as we drank it.

It took another three and a half hours to reach Moscow. The plane flew very low in case any German aircraft might be about and the air was exceedingly bumpy. One of the officers, a tank man who had never flown before, lay on the floor with his great-coat wrapped around his head, in the final despair of air sickness, and most of the civil servants turned green, but hung on to their precious luncheons with grimly pursed lips. I felt clammy and had to open my collar, but the absorbing interest of what was skimming past our windows prevented me from thinking too much of my wretched condition ; and then Major Birse began



telling us amusing stories of his experience as interpreter to important Englishmen who had come to Moscow.

He had been present at the conferences there between Churchill and Stalin ; his hasty notes of the discussions had been accepted by the Foreign Office as the official text and as such will duly enter the history books. But Birse's most abiding memory was of the easy conviviality in Joseph Stalin's apartment in the Kremlin after the initial talks had been concluded late at night and Mademoiselle Stalin had appeared as hostess to the two great men.

This young lady, still in her 'teens, proved a most assured hostess and all went merrily through a succession of toasts in vodka and Caucasian wine—just Stalin and his daughter with Winston and one Russian and one English interpreter seated around the table together—until Polish Zubrovka (vodka) was served. Major Birse thought it his duty to say to the Prime Minister : " Excuse me, sir, but if I may make the suggestion . . . I would not take any of that. It is extremely strong and I have found it very—er—unsettling."

Birse was rather worried as to how the Prime Minister would receive this admonition, but Winston mildly observed : " Oh, very well, if you say so," and left the Fire Water alone.

As we skimmed low over treetops and villages, each dominated by a great white church with golden onions upon it, we began craning our necks to see Moscow.

The first sight of the sprawling grey and red-brick city with its myriad factories belching smoke and the sun gilding the towers of the Kremlin was thrilling to us all. But I was surprised to see how compact Moscow is. From only 1500 feet one could see the suburbs on both sides of it ; the city lay embowered in woods on every side, with a clear view of the country all round it. It was, of course, intended to house some 1,500,000 people and when you see it from the air you appreciate how desperately overcrowded it is with over 3,000,000 living in it at the present time.

We flew low over a large sports stadium and big blocks of flats along what I afterwards learned was the Leningrad Chaussée and then landed on an airport which appeared to be as central as Battersea Park would be in relation to Westminster. Owing

to the petrol shortage it was an hour and a half before I could find a car to drive me into the Hotel Metropole, where most of the foreign correspondents live. I spent the time looking at the statue of Lenin with his arm pointing skyward which stands before the airport and in watching the relays of machines which kept touching down every few minutes from all parts of the Union. Most of their passengers were military—generals, with red flannel round their hats very much in the style of our own Staff, predominating.

As soon as I had settled into the hotel and found my secretary, Nadia Ulanovskaya, who had been expecting me for weeks, I set out impatiently to see something of the town before it grew dark. She led me straight into Red Square, which was not so large as the films had led me to expect because Gorky Street and the great open spaces freshly opened up nearby diminish its stature.

When you reach the new embankment along the Moskva river, in front of the Kremlin, you realise that Moscow is now in the situation in which Paris found itself after Baron Haussmann had driven his first boulevard through its old fabric—a city which has lost its old atmosphere without yet acquiring a new one. For the war interrupted a Reconstruction Plan which in ten years would have made Moscow unrecognisable to those who knew it before 1935. One day it will be the finest capital in the world for broad streets, open spaces and easy access to parks and the country ; but for the moment it has a Utilitarian, unfinished look. It is a Work in Progress, with only Gorky Street and the superb Underground railway as an earnest of what we may expect in the future.

The houses—especially those which are scheduled for demolition—have not been painted for years. Thousands of them are still of wood ; others are in the Russian Empire style with yellow and white stucco façades ; nearly all are but two stories high. The atmosphere is one of dour but extremely cleanly poverty and frugality—very much the same as a Scottish town.

When my secretary, in her perfect English and with a cynicism born of observing incoming correspondents over a period of years, said : “ Well, I suppose you will want to do a piece about Mother Russia almost at once, won’t you ? ” I replied : “ No.

They can expect no dithyrambs from me about Moscow. They wouldn't be in the spirit of the place."

And indeed I soon discovered that there was nothing remotely 'amusing' about Moscow—none of the light relief I had observed in other war capitals such as Cairo, Delhi or Baghdad in the past two years. Moscow life was sombre and earnest, as it must be at the fountainhead of a ruthless total war. There were no fripperies—only essentials, and sometimes even they were in short supply. Moscow in June, 1943, was a powerful heavyweight stripped for a fight. He had already done about seven rounds and the gong was about to go for the eighth.

But this heavyweight showed no marks of punishment. You had to look very hard to find any trace of bombing damage. Except for the camouflaging which temporarily marred the beauty of some famous buildings, the city looked normal. Traffic was heavy. Streamlined trams and electric trolley-buses glided about and there were a great number of Z.I.S. limousines looking rather like Lincolns, a lot of German cars captured at the front and a number of Jeeps.

The weather was raw and rainy. The children were back in the city. In a newly-opened park beneath the Kremlin wall they played with their balls and hoops. I saw a general solemnly toss a ball to his son, who was dressed in a sailor suit.

My old raincoat must betray my nationality because a small urchin comes up to me, salutes and says in precise English: "How do you do to-day?"

I am just able to thank him before my Russian gives out. As that was the extent of his English too, the conversation languishes.

In the streets every one seems to be in a hurry. There's no sauntering. People carry large pails with their dinners in which they are taking home from the canteen at their place of work, to reheat on the stove at home. There are great piles of logs in every street: coal is scarce and already they are preparing for the winter. As soon as the rain stops, mackintoshes are taken off and it is remarkable to see how neat most people manage to keep themselves despite the grim and grey times. This is largely because soap is still available at the public baths to supplement the tiny monthly ration. Most people are in uniform, of course,

and that helps—especially the new epaulettes of the officers—but many of the girls manage to find flowered cotton dresses. And lace collars seem the style.

It is said that the women of Moscow wear their best clothes every day now "because one must look one's best when living in great days." As in London, silk stockings are largely pre-war memories and the girls wear ankle-length tennis socks. You can still get permanently waved and manicured. And make-up—that indispensable element of female morale—is still with us. But generally speaking, the slogan is "All for the Army" and the residue is divided up among the civilians not on a basic ration as in England but according to the nature of the work performed.

For example, the highest civilian ration goes to the armaments workers, whereas, at the other end of the scale, a girl who leads a sedentary life banging a typewriter will have to make out on less. Elderly people, too old to work, who are being cared for by their families, get a ration on which their opposite numbers in England could not maintain life at all. But Russians are wonderful at 'making do'; they have graduated in a hard school. How they do it seems inexplicable to a Western European, but they seem able, on black bread and cabbage soup and tea (very sparingly used and for the most part, mere hot water) not only to keep alive but even to keep lively and energetic. But of course the food problem in Russia during 1943 was far more serious than it has ever been in England, despite the blockade.

There just was not enough food to provide a balanced diet for the nation, as there has always been in England, and since it was unthinkable that the Army or the arms workers should go short, millions of other sections of the population had to suffer that *they* might fight and work. There could be no dispute about that and so the hard and terrible fact was accepted by the people as a whole and those who suffered did so without complaint, because they knew there was no alternative.

During the summer a certain amount of American food found its way into the civilian rations in the towns. When I was leaving in September, I was actually given American dried eggs in so remote a spot as Astrakhan in preference to fresh eggs which were available there. But this was out of compliment to a foreigner—

it being presumed that Anglo-Saxons actually preferred the powdered article to the real thing !

Egg powder, tinned milk both powdered and liquid, and American and Canadian cheese were issued in Moscow and Leningrad, and American sausages and specially-prepared fat bacon (always a Russian delicacy) took the place of fresh meat. About one million Muscovites out of a population of three and a half millions were estimated to be growing their own vegetables on allotments near the capital. More than ever that summer the old jingle was true :

“ Shee i Kasha  
Peesha Nasha.”

(“ Cabbage soup and grain, that's our Daily Fare.”)

For individuals, a better ration scale was an index of promotion. As in England, money came to possess little value as the war economy removed from the market every non-essential article money might buy. The State tried to give rewards for service not in the form of money but in the right to draw from what remained in the common pool after the overriding needs of the armed forces had been met.

I remember American writers during the London Blitz remarking on how humorously, almost gaily, Londoners withstood their great ordeal. The people of Moscow were standing up to their trials just as magnificently, but in different fashion. They did not turn their deepest feelings aside into jokes. That was not their way.

The quality of their resistance was steely—it was Stalinesque. They seemed to hate the Germans more than Londoners did. Well, after all, they knew them better.

Take Anna, the Intourist girl—the one who helped me when I arrived, the one who was always smiling so that her few American clients used to call out, “ Howya, Sunshine,” when she appeared. It wasn't until the tea glasses came out and Anna was smoking one of my Persian cigarettes that I had the opportunity to find out what she had been through.

She had been in Leningrad with her baby during the siege. Her husband was killed at the front. Her parents had fallen into German hands. The end of the siege brought no joy for her, for by then her baby had died of starvation.

Many people one met had had experiences like that. The war had touched every family ; and the loss had been qualitative as well as quantitative. The Russians had given the flower of their youth, as we did in 1914-15. Do not suppose, merely because their names are not familiar to us that the Russians had not lost their Rupert Brookes and Julian Grenfells. They had lost a whole generation which could not be replaced. Four million two hundred thousand men killed and missing were the official losses admitted by Marshal Stalin on the second anniversary of the war.

That figure (which brought home to one how vast the comparable German losses were, with a population less than half that of the Soviet Union), made the loss of 23,000 aircraft, 30,000 tanks and 35,000 guns by the Russians seem almost incidental.

So it would be an impertinent affectation to say that on the eve of the summer campaign the Russians were facing the future with rosy smiles. They were too realistic for that. Even with the long-promised Second Front looming ahead in the not-too-distant future, they could see no respite from endurance and privation for a long while to come. They had given up many of the sweets of life before the war to build the Red Army instead of furnishing themselves with consumers' goods and even after Victory was won they foresaw a further period of sacrifice, devoted to repairing the immense damage the Hitlerites had done to their land and to the developing way of life of its peoples.

In my first few days in Moscow I heard plenty of talk of "post-war planning" but it was hard-headed, modest stuff—not of the "Chicken in every Pot and a baby car in every garage" variety.

At that moment there were two main preoccupations—to obtain a maximum food yield that summer and improve its distribution and to be one hundred per cent prepared lest the Germans unleashed a new rain of frightfulness from the air.

Had they tried to raid Moscow on a summer night, with the

dawn breaking about 3 a.m. and no real darkness at all, they would have been slaughtered ; night fighters would in effect have been day fighters and the ack-ack gunners would have had visible targets. But on a rainy night, with clouds darkening the sky, an attempt to break through might have been successful. It was known that the enemy still had a considerable force of bombers in reserve behind the front and if he had neglected Moscow for almost a year it was not because he hoped to capture the city intact, for should the need ever arise Moscow would become for the Germans a greater and bloodier Stalingrad.

And so there was an almost tangible atmosphere of watchfulness and preparedness. We seemed to be living once again the days of *War and Peace* but on a scale vaster and more terrible than either Tolstoy or history recorded. They were playing *War and Peace* at the Maly Theatre. It seemed like a topical production. You felt that the reception Moscow gave the Corsican 130 years ago would pale before that which would await the Austrian should he take another crack at Moscow in the weeks ahead.

I felt that I had but a short while to acclimatise myself to the Moscow scene before the storm broke. For the reporter nothing can be worse than to find himself in an utterly strange country, ignorant of its language and ways, at a time of great crisis, for once the reportorial nose is held to the grindstone of daily news-gathering and the 'filing' of, perhaps, several thousand words a day, there is no longer opportunity for self-education. I had no time to make a grand assault on the Russian language, but I tried to get the 'feel' of it by going to the theatre and by following the Russian text while my secretary translated bits out of the newspapers into English.

More important still was the need to "get the feel" of Russian life. For this I found the best recipe was to encourage Russians to talk, and then sit listening. The ability to feel the pulse of life in a strange country, even to diagnose its state of health—with or without a command of its language—that is the ability which transforms a tourist into a foreign correspondent. It is easy to say that this ability cannot be other than a superficial one. But the

reporter does not seek to convey profundities. His task—once having confessed himself a learner and a beginner—is to convey what he sees and understands through the fresh eye of the student. He cannot do more. But if he can do that without mis-statements of fact or incorrect emphasis on states of mind or opinion, then he is already doing much. One has only to read the diplomatic reports of some ambassadors to appreciate how easy it is to fail in this field.

I do not believe any one can be said to 'know' Russia who has not lived there five years. And to earn the dubious distinction of "Russian Expert" one must surely put in at least a decade in the U.S.S.R.

The foreign correspondent in Moscow suffers from a greater disability there than he does anywhere else. It is the disinclination of the average Russian to mix with foreigners. There have been good reasons for this attitude in the past. In the early years of the Soviet regime the sympathetic foreigner was welcomed with more warmth than discretion. At a time when the representatives of the "bloodthirsty Red Government" were being cold-shouldered, if not actually imprisoned or even murdered in the West, foreigners of even Liberal leanings were being welcomed in the U.S.S.R. and it was not difficult for such people to get jobs even in such key places as the Soviet radio system and in factories producing war material.

The number of such foreigners who actually took advantage of opportunities for acts of sabotage may have been small, but the existence of a widespread sabotage movement against the socialisation of industry and agriculture was revealed by the great Purges; some of the roots of this movement were traced to foreign parts, and from that time on, the hand of welcome was not freely given to foreigners. And so the situation remains to-day. Not until the war against Fascism has been finally won is this policy likely to be reversed. For one thing, it is not easy for the average Russian to distinguish between one foreigner and another; though he may be pretty sure that no Briton or American who now gains admission to the U.S.S.R. is other than a friend, there are the neutrals to consider. There are Japanese, Turks, and even Bulgarians in Moscow; all outwardly



as friendly as can be but not to be put upon the same footing as Russia's allies. Since, however, in practice, most Russians could not distinguish between a Bulgar and a Frenchman, they consider it wiser to keep all foreigners at a polite distance.

In consequence the foreign correspondents who live mostly in the Metropole Hotel on the great Theatre Square, lead pretty isolated lives. Those who have flats of their own do slightly better, but apart from considerations of security, the difficulty of entertaining or being entertained in wartime Moscow is almost insuperable. Rations take no account of such matters and there are few Russian families who could manage in these times to entertain anybody. Even foreigners, with their comparatively high food allowance, are reduced in the main to giving "Dutch Treats." You rarely go to a party without taking along a contribution with you. I remember the Australian Chargé d'Affaires telling me that when he wanted to have the British Ambassador to lunch, he had to ring up the Foreign Office for permission to secure six extra chops. The need for such parsimony cannot, of course, be gainsaid.

When you go to the Front, however, the situation is quite different. The Red Army is extremely friendly. Security there is a matter of course : no Japanese, for example, has ever been permitted near the front. Knowing that any one whom the Foreign Office sends up the line is a thoroughly trustworthy person, the Army unbends and since whatever there is in the way of material comfort goes to the soldiers, it has the wherewithal to make merry, and it does so right royally. The hospitality offered at the front is overwhelming : the repasts Gargantuan ; the service, even under canvas, surpasses the best hotel in London ; the toasts are innumerable and if the lengthy journey thither over villainous roads, or often no roads at all, does not knock you out, the scale of entertainment offered will certainly do so. Vodka appears upon the breakfast table and I have seen toasts exchanged in this treacherous beverage at seven o'clock of a dark morning !

My first contact with the Army was on a trip to fighter squadrons around the capital. Bluff, plain-spoken Colonel Koroliev, who commanded fifteen fighter aerodromes engaged in the defence of Moscow, was the host. One airfield was entirely

stocked with American Aerocobras and after a noonday banquet in a dugout, with a large silvered-wood bust of Stalin in one corner, the colonel arose and declared: "I drink to the brave British and American seamen who bring to Russia these and many other things with which to beat down the common foe!"

There had been some conversation with American correspondents about the qualities of Japanese aircraft and the next toast, proposed by a Soviet major, was to "the brave American airmen who are shooting down Japanese at the rate of twelve to one!"—which sufficed to show that, once one gets away from the atmosphere of protocol in Moscow, the average Russian likes to speak his mind as freely as any one else.

The toasts flowed freely, although it is not easy to say something felicitous when you are about thirty-fifth on the toast-list. I told them how I had seen Red Flags flying at some R.A.F. landing-grounds in the Libyan Desert out of compliment to the Red air arm (the last time had been at Benina, and I believe some senior officers took a somewhat jaundiced view of this once-sinister emblem) and I asked them to drink to the Red Flag, the Union Jack and the Star and Stripes, which they did with acclamation.

The only Black was put up by a British correspondent who launched into a long eulogy of our efforts at Singapore, attributing our disaster there to an absence of aircraft which we had unselfishly sent to Russia instead of using in the defence of our own Empire. "Red Air Force—wonderful show—sent you a lot of planes, you know—Singapore shocking show—yes, but sacrifice not in vain since it enabled you use *our* planes to beat the Hun." Such was the jingle-esque contribution to inter-allied harmony of this colleague, who sat down amid gentle hand-clapping from the Russians and an outbreak of coughing from his compatriots.

Opposite me sat Captain Eugene Gorbatynek, an ace who had bagged thirteen enemy planes and been in fifty dog-fights. His present Aerocobra, he showed me afterwards, was numbered 13 and had seven Red Stars painted on it, which meant he had shot down seven of the enemy with that machine. Gorbatynek wore the Gold Star of a Hero of the Soviet Union, which is the Russian V.C. He commanded a flight of four fighters (a Soviet

squadron contains from eight to fifteen, while an Air Regiment has four or five squadrons). He was born in the Ukraine, the son of a peasant twenty-eight years ago.

I asked him why Soviet airmen did not name their planes after their best girls, as British or American fliers are apt to do, and he replied with a great laugh: "If we did, there wouldn't be enough planes to go round!"

I noticed that the atmosphere of the station was more *regimental* than in an R.A.F. mess, and discipline seemed a good deal tighter. The pilots' dormitory had no frivolous decoration in it: instead of "Pin Up" girls there were pictures of Bolshevik leaders and popular slogans. There was a Wall Newspaper with gossip about members of the squadron, but otherwise no light relief at all, that I could see.

On the night of July 4th an Order of the Day by Hitler was read to all German units on the Eastern Front. It began with these words: "To-morrow the German Army begins a new offensive which is destined to decide the issue of the war."

At dawn on the following day the concentration of land and air power which the Germans had built up on the Orel front, less than 200 miles from Moscow, was turned loose in what at once appeared to be a very big offensive. The dam broke at 4.30 on the morning of July 5th when the German artillery began a very heavy barrage against the Soviet forward positions all around the Kursk Salient, and especially at the northern and southern extremities of it. The German thrusts with tanks and infantry came in two main directions (though there *were* diversionary attacks)—from Orel in the direction of Kursk and from Bielgorod in the same direction. The day was chilly, with heavy overhanging rain clouds.

The first communique mentioned the repulse of the enemy "south-west of Mtsensk," which is on the railway line linking Orel with Tula and Moscow, indicating that in this area at least the Germans had developed a thrust in the direction of the capital. For some time past the Soviet press had suggested that a limited offensive, with the object of knocking out Moscow and its rich industrial region, would be a logical aim, from Hitler's

point of view, for this summer. Hitler could expect three clear months' fair weather.

Moscow was all tensed up, ready for anything that might come. My secretary, who had been contemplating bringing her children back from evacuation in the Urals, declared how thankful she now was that she had not done so. I asked her if she thought it might come to a second evacuation. She seemed to think not—although the authorities display so exaggerated a tenderness for the safety of diplomats and journalists that they are apt to whisk us away into the interior at the first hint of danger. It was most unlikely that any of *us* would play Pierre Bezuhkov and watch the enemy's entry into Moscow—if ever it should come to that.

A.R.P. was tightened up the first day. Every bath tub in the city was filled with water ; fresh sandbins and extinguishers for handling incendiary bombs were prepared. The Civil Defence personnel was mobilised at the disposal of the military, although continuing to do their normal jobs for the time being. The waitresses in the Metropole, for instance, were trained in the use of arms and hand grenades and to drive trucks. They would turn out for active duty if necessary.

By the end of the first day the German attacks had been held in most places but in one sector, not far from Orel, the Germans drove in a wedge. German losses were given as 586 tanks and 200 aircraft destroyed on the first day alone.

Everywhere the enemy used large concentrations of tanks, including many 60-ton Tigers, followed by masses of infantry who advanced in open formation behind the Panzers while overhead swarms of bombers pounded the Russian defence positions in an effort to pulverise them before they could deal with the attackers. The Red Army artillery, highly skilled as always, was the outstanding feature of the defence. Mortars, many of great size, and anti-tank guns in great numbers were used. In many places duels between German tanks and Soviet artillery developed. The now classical Red Army technique of permitting tanks to roll over defence trenches, then springing forth to deal with the infantry, thus cutting the tanks off from their infantry support, was again employed with success.

The Soviet Intelligence, in connection with which the Army

newspaper *Red Star* had been calling for improved methods recently, seemed to have done well this time, for the Russians weren't taken by surprise. They claimed a precise knowledge of what the enemy had up against them. On the Bielgorod front, said they, Hitler had massed some of his best Panzer formations—four special tank divisions of S.S. troops (the Adolf Hitlers, Death's Head, Reich and Greater Germany Divisions) together with five ordinary Panzer divisions and seven divisions of infantry. On the Orel sector he had six Panzer divisions, seven of infantry and one motorised. The Germans had ready many replacements to try to keep these fifteen armoured divisions up to strength as the battle progressed, but the first few days' fighting showed that if the Russians could go on destroying tanks at the rate announced, the Germans would find this a very great strain.

By massing such great strength on a narrow front the Germans must have thought it possible to break through in a few days, for fifteen Panzer divisions constituted perhaps three-quarters of all the armour then ready for service in the *whole* German Army, on all fronts. The Russians did not throw in their tanks at all during the first days and the Germans must have been very anxious lest a strong Soviet armoured attack on another front force them to pull back some of these divisions to meet it.

At the end of the first two days, two questions emerged. Was this, in fact, a preventive offensive by the Germans? and where were the Russian tanks? The two seemed to be closely related. For weeks the Germans had put about stories that big Soviet concentrations were in evidence on the Orel front and if they took these at their face value, they might well have decided to strike first, before the Soviet preparations were complete. The Russians dealt, in the main successfully, with the powerful Nazi tank thrusts without using any tanks of their own; it was all done with artillery and infantry especially equipped for tank-busting. The Russians husbanded their tanks for a counter-attack as soon as the German onslaught had been worn down. The Germans seemed to have learned nothing new in tank tactics—they did not seem even to have grasped the lesson which Montgomery taught Rommel at Alamein, that it is crazy to try to break through minefields and into fixed defences with tanks

as your spearhead, but that sappers must clear a path first. Again and again the Germans threw tanks against Russian minefields with infantry following behind, with the result that great numbers of tanks were blown up on mines before they got close enough to worry the defenders. The Germans used swarms of bombers to try to soften up the Soviet lines before the tanks went in, but where troops are well dug in, as the Russians were, such bombing is mostly sound and fury, signifying nothing very lethal.

On the Bielgorod front, this was the pattern: 60-ton Tigers formed the spearhead. Always the Tigers came first—twenty to thirty at a time. Just behind came from forty to sixty German tractored guns, then infantry in armoured battle wagons, with the older Mark 3 and Mark 4 tanks interspersed among them. On the flanks of the advance light German tanks operated as scouts. Overhead was an umbrella of fighters and light bombers which it was the task of the Red Air Force to break up.

The Russians used mostly Lavochkin Five and Yak Seven fighters and Ilyushin Two dive-bombers and the Russians reported the German pilots reluctant to accept combat. German bombers, usually in groups of from fifty to sixty apiece, were apt to drop their bombs hastily when attacked rather than break formation as the price of getting through to their targets.

After four days the position around Bielgorod gave anxiety, although there was nothing in the nature of a break-through. By the end of a week, it was clear that although pressed back seriously in some sectors, the Russians had maintained their positions far more strongly and yielded infinitely less territory than during the first week of any other Hitlerite offensive since the war began.

On July 11th people in Moscow were breathing more easily, were, in fact, congratulating each other in the streets. The great German offensive seemed to have definitely bogged down. The Germans themselves had made no claims of progress and in the past twenty-four hours it appeared that all the Teutonic fury of the past seven days had dwindled until it was now a mere desultory kicking against the pricks of a Soviet defensive belt which had proved far deeper than the Germans had imagined.

Far from breaking through into open country where they could

use their armour to advantage, the Germans were still enmeshed in the Russian minefields, fire pockets and ambushes. From speaking of crushing advances against heavy odds, the German propagandists to whom I used to tune in on my radio (rather to the scandal of patriotic citizens who heard the flood of German issuing from under my bedroom door !) began emphasising the defensive role of their troops, their alleged success in "repelling frenzied Bolshevik counter-attacks." This suggested a convenient way out for them should Hitler decide to call off this most costly and least productive of all his offensives.

But before Hitler could do this, and while the cream of his Panzer Armée remained interlocked with the Russians inside the Kursk Salient, the Kremlin fired the starting-pistol for the great summer offensive it had long been preparing, which was to change the whole course of the war.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### STALIN STRIKES BACK

*July 11th, 1943.*—It is pouring with rain in Moscow.

My head is full of the music of "Swan Lake" and I warble as I walk. Really, I reflect, once you have seen it at the Bolshoi Theatre, the apt title for the production at Sadler's Wells with its reedy orchestra and bouncing corps de ballet becomes "Goose Pond."

Gorki Street looks like Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, on a wet Sunday night. Beneath the Kremlin wall they are scything the grass and under the trees the children are at their favourite game, creeping forward on their stomachs regardless of the puddles, pretending to be guerrillas. A column of soldiers stamps by, singing in the rain. . . . There's no outward sign of crisis in this great ungainly town at the end of Hitler's rainbow. This heroic people indulges in no heroics. Yet you feel that in this third summer of fighting, it's now or never so far as Hitler is concerned and that the individual lives of most of us in England and America will be affected profoundly by what happens here in the next few weeks.

I've been in Russia only a few weeks but that's long enough to absorb a few plain hard facts, long commonplace here but which strike you like a blow between the eyes when you arrive—no matter how much you've read about the Russian war before you arrive. These facts pertain to the waging of a total war upon land which we are going to have to wage when we disembark in Europe.

Hitherto we've fought an African war, an air war and a sea war. Now we must expect to engage in a Russian kind of war, a war of extermination upon land. Assuming we are prepared for this materially; have we braced ourselves mentally? Do we fully realise what we will be up against? If not, there's still time to learn a few urgent lessons from the Russians.



First of all the Russians have gone much further than we in annulling every individual right so that the nation's demands may always be promptly met, no matter how many individual toes are trodden on. When the Russians say "Every one is mobilised," they mean that, literally: if need be families will be split up, workers will be transported thousands of miles to essential work. In general the Red Army man doesn't get any leave at all. It's not practical to give any. Units come out of the line to rest and some soldiers get to Moscow on duty or sick leave, but it's true to say that the vast majority of soldiers who were called up when the invasion began have had no leave for two years. The vast size of the country and the millions of men serving meant that transport just could not run to that and serve Total War at the same time.

Another thing—Press and cinema have educated the Russians in the full horrors of war. This has proved excellent for morale. It means that Russians don't panic, don't shock—no matter what the circumstances. Some of their war films are so horrible that you wince, but you feel mentally strengthened afterwards. Is it not still a fact that British and American newspapers won't publish certain things about the war because "you can't print that in a family newspaper"? Is it true that our official propaganda line still depicts the war rather as a tug of war, a contest which, *ipso facto*, has rules and conventions? This war can have no rules. The Germans have abolished them. In Russia the struggle is grim, horrible, bestial beyond all imagining. The Germans, having been taught to regard the Russians as animals—worse, as sub-human vermin whom it is a virtue to exterminate—can slaughter Russians without the slightest moral compunction. In return, the Russians apply the slogan: "Any Fascist on Soviet soil who does not surrender himself must be killed." The only good German is a dead one. Though it's true that those who have seen the devastated territories think the Russian soldier is a thought too tender-hearted. . . .

Are British belts really as tight as they should be so that every available ship can be used to maintain our army on the Continent? The Russians make no secret of the fact that for them the food situation is very, very serious. You see evidence of that in white,

pinched faces every day. . . . The Russians eat little because they are obliged to, true enough : they cannot juggle priorities in shipping-space. Yet they not only send all the best food and clothing to the front but they have cut down alcohol and cigarettes to the point where the nation is practically teetotal and a cigarette is a great luxury. That they've done voluntarily, to save labour and raw materials.

Even we foreigners, who receive great consideration, find it hard to get a drink. I was allowed two litres of vodka my first month, but now that's ceased. There is no beer or wine to be bought, no bars or teashops are open to casual custom. You get tea at breakfast, lunch and supper, but cannot get a glass in between times. An incidental result of this drastic paring down of life to its barest essentials is that social envy has disappeared. Moscow is the only capital I know where it would be possible to walk through the poorest quarter in a smart suit, smoking a cigar and with a bottle of champagne under one's arm without any one passing an unfriendly remark. They'd merely think : " That fellow must either have just been rewarded for inventing a new aircraft or tank or else he's a foreign ambassador, an honoured guest." Privilege *does* exist relatively, but it is the rare reward of very exceptional services.

One hesitates to make racial generalisations *à la* Hitler, yet if the Fuehrer ever believed his own theories it must have been while looking eastwards over his own shoulder that he promulgated them. If the Hitlerite theory of a Master Race *could* be applied to any one, why, it would be precisely to the Slavs, although our Allies would be the last to desire the appellation. For Hitler's criteria of what constitutes the superman are to be found much more commonly among Russians than among Germans. Fertility in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the U.S.S.R., for example, is considerably higher than among the Germanic tribes. Despite all present tribulations, we may be statistically certain that soon after the armistice there will be 200 million people living in the Soviet Union.

Despite industrialisation, the Russians are still basically a peasant people—sturdy countryfolk who happen to be able to drive tanks and fly planes. They seem to have no nerves. A

British medical mission which visited Russia since the war, reported that Russians seemed able to survive operations which would prove fatal to Western Europeans or Americans, through post-operative shock. It is a matter of common observation that they have good teeth—and how rarely does one see spectacles upon a Russian nose ! The Russian norm is altogether a tougher biological proposition than the German. The Russians are devoid of Weltschmerz or sentimentality, nor have they the German weakness for longing to be liked. The Russian temperament is stolid, self-assured, self-opinionated. Weak, soulful characters from Tchekhov or Tolstoy are no more like the modern Soviet citizen than Eric or Little by Little is like an R.A.F. fighter pilot.

An old saying has it—"A Russian can stand anything." But in our boundless enthusiasm for our ally it would be unwise to assume that he can stand anything indefinitely. There are limits to what flesh and blood can support, week after week, month after month. The Russians have the same extraordinary vitality under adversity as the Spanish peasant showed against Napoleon and in the recent civil war, but without the Spanish fatalism or resignation. The Russian mind will never resign itself to defeat or even to stalemate. But, I repeat, the human body has its limitations. I gravely doubt whether any race but the Russians, or perhaps the Chinese, could have stood what millions of Russians had to stand this past dreadful winter.

On the second anniversary of the war Moscow officially declared : "Without the second front, victory over Hitler Germany is impossible." Don't let's kid ourselves about what our own role must be. I've heard British soldiers—even perhaps the very men who are going to do the job—express the opinion that "once we land on the Continent and establish a bridgehead and hang on, that will remove armies from the eastern front and give the Red Army a chance to finish the job." Facile, fatal misconception ! The Red Army may one day march into Berlin, but it won't be after a mere 'diversion' by the Allies in the west. It will be only after a great Allied campaign, a second front perhaps as vast as the first and, we know, far harder to initiate. Look at the distance between Orel and Berlin—almost as far as from Madrid to Berlin. Think of the hundreds of miles

through which the Germans can safely retreat, burning and wrecking everything as they go. . . . So many Russian lives have been lost that the Red Army which started this war has virtually disappeared and a new one—perhaps more battle-worthy—taken its place. But it would surely cost a whole new Red Army to drive into Germany under present conditions, unless the Germans in the east had not only been drawn off in large numbers but also weakened by heavy overall casualties.

For there is truth in Hitler's claim that the Russians are fighting not Germany alone but all Europe. The Russians are fighting Swedish steel and Spanish ore and the slave-driven arms industry of the whole continent as well as some 200 divisions. And the Americans and ourselves are pledged to get in there and help them finish the job. After seeing a little of what *their* effort has cost the Russians, one realises that it is going to be the most bitter struggle the British race has ever been called on to endure—a struggle beside which the Battle of Britain was a bagatelle and the African victory, splendid though it was, a mere colonial operation.

Therefore let us steel ourselves for what lies ahead. Let our Ministers desist from easy praise of "the gallant Russians" and give a directive to our own army and people about the stony, bloody path that lies before us.

Significantly, you don't meet English people in Russia who believe in the existence of some relatively painless "British Way" of winning the war in the air or by seizing "strategic locations" or by hopping from one island to another. There is only one way of doing it—by the tramp of great British and American armies across the continent of Europe. We have to start fighting a Russian kind of war from now on if we are to help the Russians to win. For if the Russians do not win, we know there can be no future for us whatever in our little island in the North Sea.

. . . Such were my random thoughts, walking up Gorki Street on the evening of July 11th. I did not know that the long-awaited Russian counter-attack was then just beginning.

It was a humid night in the intervals of thunderstorms when to the Red Army units on the central front came an order from Stalin which said: "To-morrow you attack."

Under dark rain clouds, in sodden woods and fields, the Russian soldiers cheered the news and immediately took up their preliminary positions, which months of training had accustomed them to do like clockwork. German artillery positions and pill-boxes which had been marked and registered for weeks past received the first salvoes of a terrific artillery barrage before dawn on the twelfth. A creeping barrage was then laid down under cover of which the Russians began to advance.

The task before them was of overwhelming difficulty. Most of the German positions had been perfected during the course of a year and a half. The Russians, who had seen how hard it was for the enemy to penetrate at all into their own defences farther south, well knew what lay before them in trying to break the German line. Reconnaissance units sent out with the task of capturing enemy 'tongues,' as the Russians call prisoners useful to the intelligence, had to be supported by the fire of several batteries of artillery, so tough was the German first line.

As at Stalingrad, it was to the artillery that the honour of opening the battle fell. Their fire was so heavy that it smashed a good many German batteries and pillboxes before the attack began, but the enemy put up so strenuous a resistance that although the attack went in at first light it was not until the evening that the Russians succeeded in breaking through, in some places, to a distance of seven miles, occupying thirty villages and dealing the enemy's 293rd Division in particular such a blow that it fell back leaving most of its equipment behind—including, strangely enough, large numbers of bicycles.

The plan for this offensive had been laid months earlier—probably in March, when the spring thaw lost the Russians Kharkov and brought their advance from Stalingrad to an end. Who laid the plan? In great part it was Stalin himself, who is not only commander-in-chief like Roosevelt but also his own chief of staff and often even commander in the field. Stalin's visits to the front are never publicised but all Russia knows he is often there. Well, Stalin and who else? The State Committee of Defence, which means predominantly Marshals Voroshilov. Zhukov, General Shaposhnikov and that important but little known man Scherbakov, member of the Polit-bureau, chairman

of the Moscow Communist Party Committee and head of the Soviet Information Bureau. The Pickwickian-looking Scherbakov is not a military man (though he has the title of general) but he is a great political boss who is reputed to possess a first-class brain and, for so young a man, is very close to Stalin.

The National Committee's plan was probably laid before the army commanders in April, for by May the Germans were beginning to put out feelers in the neutral press about the big Russian concentrations around Orel. The army commanders were mainly men of whom no one had heard at the beginning of the war, men who proved their ability during the terrible months of 1941 when the Red Army appeared to be beaten beyond recovery. Reading from south to north, the Battle Order was : General Maslennikov in the Kuban, General Malinovsky on the Rostov front, General Koniev on the Steppe front. General Vatutin with his Voronezh army, General Rokossovsky, the hero of Stalingrad, around Kursk, with Generals Popov and Sokolovsky at Orel. In the north, not directly connected with the summer offensive, was Marshal Timoshenko with Generals Golikhov, Reuter, Tuleniev and Yaromienko also not immediately engaged and in the rear, around Saratov and along the Volga, was the veteran Marshal Budyenny, doing a big job in training the millions of new conscripts needed for the summer's battles.

Budyenny's job was vital. The Soviet "total mobilisation" preceded the German equivalent in 1943 by many months. There were whole new armies to be licked into shape, some of them very raw. Russia had no millions of foreign workers to put into her factories, but she had an advantage which neither Germany nor any other nation possessed to the same degree—Russian women, ready and capable of doing almost any job, no matter how heavy. The proportion of women in the factories was raised ; on the farms it reached fantastic heights because the peasantry is the backbone of the Red Army, as it had been of the Czarist army, and every man was needed.

In the Ukraine I was to see villages without a single man in them under sixty except an occasional village idiot. The whole life and production of the countryside was being carried on by women and boys. But having lost over four millions killed, it was

essential that this vast manpower be used economically and so the summer campaign, which began at Orel and then flared up all along a front from the Black Sea as far north as Sukhi-Nichi, provided in every case for encirclement, never for attacking any strong-place head-on.

Like everything really important in Russia, the plan was kept intensely secret and it was several weeks after the Germans' Kursk offensive had been smashed before the world understood that the Russian riposte wasn't just a counter attack but the greatest offensive the Red Army had yet launched.

We cannot flatter ourselves that Allied equipment played any but a small part in this campaign, although American food was vital in feeding the army as well as the civilian front. But when I went to the front I saw very great numbers of new American and British trucks: the proportion of these among Soviet trucks was high, and no doubt they were our largest material contribution. Jeeps, Fords, Bedfords and Dodges could be seen not only at the front but also in the cities.

*July 13th, 1943.*—On the second day the battle was resumed with even fiercer momentum. The Germans were obliged to call off all attempts to break through towards Kursk and to concentrate on the defensive and air photos showed considerable numbers of German troops being rushed up towards Orel. During the second day the Russians broke through no fewer than three defensive lines and completely routed the 5th Panzer Division and the 211th Infantry Division. Scouts found secret approaches to the River Oka and during the following night no fewer than twenty-seven bridges were thrown across it. The momentum of the Soviet drive and the great force behind it seemed to astonish the Germans—and no wonder, for any one might have assumed that the Russians would require time to rest after breaking the German's own summer offensive.

*July 19th, 1943.*—The Germans retreating on the Orel front have developed a Stalingrad complex. Like the dogs in the experiments of Professor Pavlov, they've got a "conditioned reflex" and figuratively foam at the mouth at the slightest threat of encirclement, so great is their fear of it.

Just a fortnight ago, Hitler ordered them to attack at Kursk,

in order "to avenge Stalingrad." The use of that ill-omened name was unfortunate, for German prisoners, the Russians say, seem to have Stalingrad on the brain and are so sensitive to the risk of being caught again between Russian tongs that their defensive tactics suffer thereby.

Night and day the battle rages. The Germans fight strongly, but not, it seems, with quite the same fury and determination they've displayed in the past. The Russians give them no time to dig in after they've withdrawn, but follow up closely. Often the Russians occupy a village at one end just as the Germans are pulling out from the other. The Germans leave 'hedgehogs' of resistance behind with orders to resist to the end. These men are told to expect no quarter from the Russians. Nor do they get any unless they surrender promptly. The enemy are up to their old tricks (practised against us in Africa) of leaving a handful of men copiously armed with machine-guns to do as much damage as they can to advancing troops, then, when they've had enough, to count on the enemy's magnanimity to permit them to lay down their arms and proceed comfortably into internment after slaughtering many of the attackers. But the Russians don't care for this technique. Their watchword is: "An enemy who doesn't surrender when called upon to do so can expect no mercy."

Interment instead of internment is the fate of Nazis who try this trick on nowadays.

The German radio now admits "penetrations and wedges" by the Russians not only at Orel but also in the south, on the line of the Donetz.

The weather over the battlefield is sultry and stormy. Depressing rainclouds hang low and the air seems filled with the menace of worse storms to come.

*July 20th, 1943.*—"We are fighting the biggest defensive battle of the whole war: a few days ago the fighting flared up along the whole front. The Soviets' summer campaign is in full swing and never since the war began has such an enormous quantity of war material been accumulated by the Russians." Thus spake to-day the, for once, truthful German radio. Confirmation of that never before has Russia's might been so great



comes to-day in the form of a letter from the armaments workers of the Urals to Stalin, which pledges that for 1943 as a whole they will give the army twice as many weapons of war as they gave them in 1942. Confirmation, too, from Sir Walter Citrine's mission of British trade unionists, who are in Moscow on their way home after a trip of thousands of miles into the Russian rear through the great armaments city of Sverdlovsk to Omsk, Novosibirsk and right down to Stalinsk near the borders of Mongolia.

Our unionists say they were shown everything, received a hospitality which almost shattered their constitutions and came away overwhelmed by an impression of the might which had been built up there under the Five Year Plans. Industrial technique they found as advanced near the Mongolian wilds as in European Russia. Some factories they saw employed as much as 90 per cent women and many as high as 75 or 60 per cent.

One factory consisting of 3550 different pieces of machinery weighing from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 6 tons was evacuated from Moscow to the Urals with 45 per cent of its employees and got working again in twenty-eight days, the balance of labour being recruited on the spot.

The normal working day they found was eight hours plus three hours overtime paid at the rate of time and a half—the same as in Britain or America to-day. Wages in one factory varied from 250 roubles for women packers to 2000 roubles a month for a skilled electrician.

In a coal mine they found that 25 per cent of the workers underground were women, but the girls didn't work at the coal face; there the average wage was 1500 roubles monthly, but a few Stakhanovite miners got as high as 20,000 roubles—more than the manager, who got 5000 roubles.

It is impossible to anglicise these values—except to say that 20,000 roubles is a very large sum of money, with education and medical services for the family costing practically nothing and war-time rations also given at a high scale and at controlled prices. For running the *Daily Express* office in Moscow, with a secretary and a courier, and for keeping myself at one of the best hotels, I received 10,000 roubles a month—and I never went short. A wage of 250 roubles a month is very low certainly, but

unless the girls concerned were very young, they would almost certainly be married (there are very few spinsters in the U.S.S.R.) and if they were not, their 250 would probably contribute to a family income.

July 22nd, 1943.—Feeling personally very gloomy, despite all the good news and the pleasant people I've been meeting—people like Quentin Reynolds, who seems to love all the world ; Tamara the artist, smoking a pipe and with a human skull on her dressing-table ; Alexander Werth, whom we get to play the piano for hours at a stretch and Ilya Ehrenbourg, with his extravagant mop of hair and his remarkable French, which he uses with more richness of point and allusion than a Frenchman could manage.

Gloomy, too, despite amusing personalities—the old manservant of Alexei Tolstoy, the writer and member of the Soviet Atrocities Commission, who habitually makes this slip on the telephone—"I am sorry, but his Excellency the Count has gone to a meeting of the præsidium of the Communist Party" ; or Stalin's young daughter Svetlana ("Light of the World") who on entering her particulars at the university gives her father's occupation as "professional revolutionary." Despite my own little burlesque which scores some hits at the expense of the kind of foreigner who is always seeing mysterious and horrible events "behind the scenes" in Russia, viz. :

"When A and B with much secrecy were admitted to the Kremlin recently, they stopped outside a row of private houses and A was indiscreet enough to indicate one of them to B and murmur : 'Do you think *that* is the one?'"

"They never so much as mentioned the *name* of Stalin, but when the N.K.V.D. men were conducting them out again they looked for the house they had noticed before and, do you know, *that house was no longer there.*"

I am gloomy because I am beginning to wonder whether I shall ever get home to see my wife. I have been away over two years now and letters, as is bound to happen on both sides, are beginning to grow thin in texture and to cause one to feel that there must be many interests, and new people, who are not being mentioned because they are unknown to *you*, and so thought to

be of no interest. I know so many people who have not seen their wives now for three or four years and who yet confidently assume that they will be able to pick up their marriages one day just at the point where they laid them down ; but that seems to me to run counter to human nature. Apart from the breaking of bodies, war breaks up human relationships and the tragedy for thousands of men who have been in the East is that, if their existing relationships at home are severed by the end of the war, they will have no others to take their place for, by and large, Englishmen do not find their affinities in such places as Khartoum, Baghdad or Manipur. It would be a strange fate, if, at the end of this war, there were thousands of surplus Englishmen on the market, as there were surplus women in England in 1919. . . .

*July 25th, 1943.*—Stalin issues an Order of the Day to the effect that the liquidation of the German drive against the Kursk salient has averted the danger of a German summer offensive this year and people in Moscow are visibly cheered by it. A great weight seems lifted from their shoulders—the weight of the regular German offensive which was becoming a dread date in the Soviet calendar. The loss of valuable ground which could be regained only in the Soviets' winter offensive seemed to menace the Russians every year. But in July, 1943, it was all different. Instead of penetrating a score of miles or even hundreds of miles into the Soviet rear, the Germans never penetrated more than five miles on the Orel-Kursk front and from ten to about twenty miles on the Bielgorod sector—the smallest, most transient gains the Germans had ever made since the war began.

When the Kursk offensive began, Muscovites joked that even the weather had now turned against Adolf. Day after day there was nothing but rain. Black clouds hung oppressively low. The air was sticky. Storms of wind descended and in their wake followed almost tropical downpours of hail, which made the colour-wash stream off the houses and sometimes even smashed windows. It was as though Nature were working up her theatrical effects as a prelude to some great tragedy.

German prisoners say, one after another, that they never thought the Russians capable of launching a summer offensive. They mistook a heavy Soviet reconnaissance on July 11th for the

real thing, so when the Russians withdrew that evening, the Germans congratulated themselves that the Red Army had tried, and failed.

But the continued wet weather handicaps the Russians—so much so that they must often wonder whether this is not one of their winter offensives after all. On the poor roads the mud is almost as thick as when the snow is thawing. So it would be reasonable to expect the advance on Orel to proceed slowly—until this mock winter lifts at least and a few shafts of sunlight appear.

*July 26th, 1943.*—If Moscow suddenly heard that Hitler had resigned and that Marshal Brauchitsch had installed a military regime in Germany, what would the Red Army do? To ask that question is to find guidance as to how the news of Mussolini's fall appears here.

Of course the Red Army would redouble its blows against the German army and go on belabouring it until it cracked for good and all.

Viewed from Moscow, the end of Mussolini has two aspects—military and political. If this heralds the withdrawal of Italy from the war, then it is a factor of the greatest military importance especially for what it will mean in removing Italian garrisons from the Balkans and forcing Germany to send divisions to hold Greece and Yugoslavia alone. But the political side of the question is by no means clear, and they are not hanging out the flags in the streets of Moscow yet. In their careful, unhurried way they will want to find out a lot more about the political aspects first.

Ordinary citizen Ivan in the Moscow streets was delighted with the news.

Although, with the customary understatement of the Soviet press, it was carried on *Pravda's* back page where all foreign news appears in unimpressive type, Russians looked over my shoulder as I read it and commented: "There goes the first of the twin rascals!" . . .

The Russians despise Mussolini as a vulgar mountebank, whereas Hitler they loathe with a holy hate.

Italian troops on this front are always known as 'macaronis,' and the Red Army men have a poor opinion of their quality. Some of Osbert Lancaster's cartoons of Italian officers with

blue jowls in operatic poses, which I have with me, delight my Russian friends and are passed from hand to hand around Moscow. The Russians have taken over 40,000 Italian prisoners on this front, but it is believed no more Italian troops are in the East to-day; although a few weeks ago a squadron of Italian Fiat planes appeared over the Baltic and were soundly trounced by the Red Air Force. They have not been mentioned in the news since.

In the early years of his regime, Mussolini maintained good relations with the Soviet Union, which he was the first to recognise. Italian engineers have helped to construct industries in the U.S.S.R., and units of the Red Fleet have been built in Italy.

Until Abyssinia and Spain, and so long as Italian Fascism appeared not to be an article for export, the Soviet Union's relations with Italy were correct, but as soon as it became plain that the poisons of Fascism were seeping out of Italy into the rest of Europe, the Russians began regarding Mussolini as the father of European Fascism, and thus as the mortal enemy of all that the U.S.S.R. stands for.

Badoglio's call to Italians to rally round the King Emperor of a non-existent empire is noted here under all reserve. Stalin's present policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other States means that the Soviet Union has no objection to constitutional monarchy if the people of a given country really desire such a form of government. But Russians feel no especial tenderness for the House of Savoy.

For twenty years the House of Savoy sheltered Fascism and shared its booty, even descending to the despicable farce of setting one of its members up as puppet King of Croatia.

However, military considerations take first place and there can be no doubt that what the Russians want out of this situation is the military surrender of Italy—honourable or dishonourable, call it any name you please—but cut the Axis into two, isolate the Italian gangsters from the German mobsters the better to track down and get the real "Big Shot" in Berlin.

*July 27th, 1943.*—Writing to Stalin and getting a reply is not so unusual a feat as the publication of recent letters to British and American correspondents would imply. What was excep-

tional in those cases was Stalin's permission to publish the correspondence.

To-day, I went to the great postern gate in the Kremlin wall, not far from the Lenin Library, where letters to President Kalinin, Stalin, Molotov and other leaders are handed in.

I entered a gatehouse arranged rather like a small telegraph office inside, with two glass windows. The gatehouse is known as "Kalinin's reception chamber," from the days when the President had enough leisure to receive visiting peasants and workers there personally. Now letters to him and his colleagues are received by clerks, who give each caller a receipt on the spot. Letters are then taken into the Kremlin for distribution. Sometimes, a personal reply is sent, but more often in these days of paper shortage and strenuous work, the writers have to be content with an official receipt and the knowledge that their grievance or request has been delivered to the office of the great man himself.

Putting a letter in at the Kremlin is, in fact, a tested Muscovite way of blowing off steam—rather like "writing to the *Times* about it."

My letter asked whether it would be possible to obtain details about Stalin's visit to England as a young revolutionary. Few people knew that he had ever been there until a new short biography of Stalin printed in English just recently declared that he went to London for the conference of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in April and May, 1907, and published a booklet called *Notes of a Delegate* on his return. The house in London in which Lenin stayed bears a commemorative plaque, and I suggested that the people of London would wish to do the same for the unknown boarding-house where Joseph Dugashvili put up—if indeed it withstood the blitz.

*July 28th, 1943.*—Of all the first-line German divisions in Russia only 25 per cent are completely German in composition—all the rest after two years steady bleeding away by the Russians have had to be diluted with Poles, Czechs, Austrians and men from Alsace-Lorraine. Such are the findings of the Red Army Intelligence.

Among German second line divisions, especially among

Panzer units, the number of purely "Aryan" divisions is considerably higher, and among the reserve divisions at the disposal of the German High Command, there are still many in which no non-Germans are enlisted. But in 50 per cent of all first line divisions on the Eastern front, non-Germans form from 5 to 15 or 20 per cent of the personnel. In 25 per cent of these divisions the ratio is still higher—non-Germans forming from one-third to a half of the whole personnel.

Poles and other non-Germans form 30 per cent of the personnel of the 38th and 15th Infantry Divisions. In the 39th Infantry Division non-Germans form 50 per cent of the whole—30 per cent Austrians and 20 per cent Poles.

Most of these diluted divisions arrived in Russia in the spring of 1943 from Western Europe, where they had been engaged in police duties; but it is clear, the Soviet Intelligence reports, that the mass of these non-Germans, while ready to parade about occupied Europe in German uniforms, are not in the least eager to shed their blood for the Reich, for during the last two to three months, despite all the difficulties in the way, dozens of Poles and Austrians deserted in batches to the Red Army.

*July 30th, 1943.*—The battle for Orel continues with unabated fury on its nineteenth day. The Red Army is struggling against picked divisions of the 2nd German Panzer Army once commanded by General Guderian, who was replaced in command by Colonel-General Schmidt after Guderian was defeated at Tula in 1942 following the failure of his drive on Moscow.

On July 14th, the third day of the present Soviet offensive, Schmidt was also removed, the Russians say, and Hitler appointed in his place Colonel-General Modl, who on taking over command issued an order of the day demanding a supreme effort from his men. Copies of this order were captured by the Russians. Modl, after much lofty and repetitive talk about more Lebensraum, says bluntly: "We must fight without thought for our lives in order to prevent the complete defeat of the German Army."

However, neither difficult terrain with swollen rivers and impeding swamps, nor extraordinary deep enemy defences, nor the desperately stubborn German resistance, nor heavy air attacks are stopping the Soviet penetration from proceeding. It

is largely the Soviet infantry now who are dealing with the Tiger tanks and the giant tractor guns called "Ferdinands."

There are no satellite troops in the Orel battle, only Germans, but among the Nazi divisions Russians report finding Frenchmen from Alsace, Czechs, Slovenes and Luxembourgers and even a few Frenchmen from France itself.

The Russians have captured examples of the so-called new "secret weapon" which they call the "steel crab." It is a portable two-man pillbox on wheels which can be removed so that one can dig the contrivance into a pit and camouflage it. It has a rounded steel roof, is entered by a small armoured hatch and inside has a radio, two benches and a pedalling device like a bicycle to work an air-conditioning plant.

The box is hermetically sealed once the men are inside. It has an outlet for one machine-gun and a tiny vent whence the foul air is forced out. The idea seems to be to make it gasproof and proof against hand grenades or mortars. Small arms will not penetrate it.

General Kolpakchy, whose troops have captured several, has made a close study of it.

In the fighting around Bielgorod the Germans produced another "secret weapon" which, however, was withdrawn as a failure after five days' trial. It was a land torpedo. It resembled a large "Dachshund" mounted on wheels containing a charge of explosives and propelled by an air screw. The Germans launched it across No Man's Land so that it would career across like a tank and explode in the Russian lines.

The terrain had to be absolutely flat, for if the torpedo met any obstacle it was liable to explode spontaneously.

It had little real destructive effect compared with bombing or shelling, but it embodied the old Nazi idea of frightening and surprising the enemy in the hope of forcing a quick break-through.

Russians who saw it say the novelty was alarming at first but that the Red Army had a quick method of dealing with it. Soviet snipers were simply massed along the front and had good shooting practice exploding the queer contraptions as they rumbled towards them. At other times, Soviet artillery would shell points where the "Dachshunds" were being assembled and explode



them while still in the enemy lines. The German gave up using these things after many had been destroyed in five days.

*August 6th, 1943.*—Just before ten o'clock last night Moscow Radio announced that important news was coming in an hour's time. There was mounting excitement as the hour approached. Crowds gathered around the loudspeakers in the streets ; then at eleven o'clock was heard the solemn music of the new National Song which begins :

“ How wide is my Native Land,  
Its forest, field and stream ;  
I swear I know no other land  
Where a man may breathe so free.”

Then was read, very slowly, the Order of the Day from Marshal Stalin announcing the capture of Orel and Bielgorod.

At midnight came the first of the great series of salutes which were to continue regularly through the winter of that year. One hundred and twenty guns boomed forth a total of 1440 rounds in salute to the victors and the sky was illuminated by green, red and blue rockets. It was the biggest victory celebration the capital had known since Stalingrad and crowds surged through the streets, clapping their hands and hurrahing with a strange, surging sound. But there was no merrymaking, as we should regard it, nor did I hear any laughter. It was a Puritan celebration. No drink was available nor were there any additional rations. The midnight curfew was extended till 2 a.m. so that people could listen to the music in the streets. That was all.

But the Germans were in full retreat upon Briansk and, as Stalin's order made plain, it was no longer a question of the Orel Bulge but of the Briansk Front ; and this realisation, to people who so recently had been faced with a fierce German attempt to seize their capital, was of an order which does not depend upon mafficking for the expression of the deepest happiness.

Behind this sober rejoicing there must have been a feeling comparable to that which we in England would have experienced if, following a defensive victory like the Battle of Britain, we had been able to go out and score a triumph against German arms on the Continent.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TO OREL, KHARKOV AND THE UKRAINE

*On the Bryansk Front, August 11th, 1943.*

IN THIS tented camp on the banks of the River Oka, I am the guest of the Red Army. It is a pity they do not have Allied war correspondents actually with them all the time in the field, but we must abide by their methods of working and when they do invite you up to the front, they certainly do things in style. Never have I been in a more comfortable camp. Arriving here exhausted after a sixteen-hour drive from Moscow through Tula in American trucks which had been intended as ammunition carriers and not for carrying correspondents over villainous tracks (which the Germans seem to have done nothing to improve in their two years of occupation), we were shown into big tents camouflaged with the branches of trees. In each were four iron beds with sheets and mattresses; in the centre a writing table and chairs with a vase of flowers and electric light installed.

Red Army girls ushered us in, insisting on unpacking our bags for us as though we were visiting some country-house for the week-end. The commandant of the garrison at Mtsensk, who had conducted us from there, came in to supervise matters. He addressed them thus: "Come along, girls, let us get the comrade correspondents settled in."

And they replied: "Very good, comrade General."

The first thing offered was a bath. A lorry with a large boiler and pump on it pumped river water into an adjoining tent where it emerged boiling hot out of no fewer than eight showers. Red Army men inside presented us with soap and towels and insisted on scrubbing our backs with loofahs—a nice attention, as we were covered all over with ingrained black dust off the roads. Then dinner in a mess tent where General Peter Sobennikov, who represented Marshal Stalin and the Supreme Command with the

army which took Orel, received us. Sobennikov had been in the Russian Army continuously since 1914 ; he was a Czarist officer, and he looked it.

He apologised for the dinner, saying that time had not permitted anything special being arranged—just the ordinary meal which the Army Headquarters which occupied this area until recently would have had. So we sat down to vodka and hors d'œuvres, onion soup, steak and potatoes and vodka and stewed fruit and tea and vodka and vodka again. Chocolates and crystallised fruit for dessert. At the table was the wife of one of the army commanders, General Gorbutoy, and Mikhail Romashin with the Gold Star of a Hero of the Soviet Union and three other decorations on his dark double-breasted suit.

Romashin, who resembles a rather mischievous-looking business executive, organised and, until lately, led one of the largest guerrilla bands in Russia, who operated thousands strong around Bryansk. Now he is Chief of the Orel Soviet, but his guerrillas are fighting harder than ever in the German rear as the Red Army presses on towards Bryansk.

Romashin told me the Germans offered for him, dead or alive, a reward of 15,000 roubles, a house, two cows, one horse and 30 acres of land, but, he added, " people thought this was too little, so they didn't betray me ! "

In one engagement, his band held a German punitive expedition 1500 strong three days in a forest and killed 600 of them, since when no German troops dare enter the forests.

General Sobennikov told me that Churchill and American General Grant tanks and quantities of Allied trucks—Bedfords, Dodges and Fords—were used in the capture of Orel, before which the Luftwaffe's defensive effort was the greatest he had ever seen. On one day the general saw 380 aircraft pass over him in one enormous sortie.

" Why are we winning ? " he exclaimed. " It's because (1) we have gained greatly in battle experience ; (2) materially we are stronger than ever before ; and (3) the German Army is no longer what it was."

Sobennikov told me he expects the Germans to try to stand at Bryansk upon the line of the River Desna, which runs through

the city and proceeds roughly north and south of it, but that, once that line goes, there is nothing but open country without serious natural obstacles between Bryansk and the River Dnieper.

Here, one can see with one's own eyes the great part the Red Air Force is playing in this offensive. There is an airfield close to us here and from dawn to dusk an endless procession of Soviet machines takes off and lands there—mostly bombers. It is the same kind of non-stop bombing shuttle service with which Conyngham, the A.O.C. Western Desert, achieved such great results in Africa, and the Russians are largely using the same American medium bombers as he did. Sweeps of Russian fighters are passing up and down the lines of communication all day also. They are flying very low, usually hedge-hopping. For some reason air encounters on this front seem to be taking place at low altitudes. Doubtless that is why the Russians set such value upon the America Airacobra which is at its best in this type of fighting. From all the evidence I believe that the Red Air Force has genuine mastery of the air on this front. I have seen only one German machine—a solitary reconnaissance plane which made off as soon as it was spotted.

The Soviet multi-barrelled guns, nicknamed "Katushas," are prominent in this drive upon Bryansk. I was indiscreet enough to ask General Sobennikov what they were like, and he answered: "Sorry I can't tell you, except to say they are very beautiful and that when Katusha sings she makes the Germans dance like mad!"

After two years fighting up and down the Russian countryside, the Red Army men have learned how to make themselves as comfortable as possible; as indeed they should, for camp is home for them and the majority cannot get any leave.

Seeing me shaving by the river, a Russian lieutenant told me not to bother but come and sample the camp barber. In a tent I found an army barber with a girl assistant, who quickly lathered me whilst the barber, true to his calling even at the front, engaged in voluble conversation about the famous faces he had shaved.

"Comrade-General Rokossovsky now," said the barber—"there's an awkward beard for you. Many's the time I've handled him; and General Vatutin and General Popov, too. I

may say that your beard is like that of Rokossovsky. You are not fortunate in your beard, Comrade Correspondent."

The barber then began to develop his ideas on strategy whilst another soldier came in and polished my boots. In the midst of this, an alert was given and with extraordinary solicitude for the skin of a war correspondent the like of which I have never encountered with any other army, it was suggested that I get into a slit trench which was quite eight feet deep and lined with wood. Asking whether such elaborate protection was really necessary, I was told: "The Germans evidently thought so. This was a German camp site before we moved in and the Germans built these against the bombs of the Red Air Force."

*Orel, August 13th, 1943.*

Like some repulsive beast that leaves behind it a trail of slime, the German Fascists are retreating on Bryansk with a wake of horror and butchery behind them.

I am standing beside the common grave of 200 Russian men and women. It is a great trench eighty yards long, of which only a third so far as been uncovered by workers of the Soviet Atrocities Commission. I can see nine other similar trenches in the field behind the prison yard of Orel.

This is a field of butchery. Body is piled upon body, six and ten feet high. They are of both sexes and all ages. Five Red Army doctors in white coats and rubber gloves are establishing the cause of death in each case, when that is possible—and usually it is, because those who did not die of starvation have a neat bullet hole in the back of the head—and three young Russian girls seated at a table are entering particulars of each case in books. Hour after hour the terrible work proceeds. This is another Lidice, another Krasnodar. And this field is only one of three in Orel.

Surgeon-General of the Red Army, Professor Nikolai Boudienko, who is Chairman of the Atrocities Commission, is now examining another of these Nazi slaughter-houses, known as the Brick Field. Every grave will be opened in time, and in each case an effort will be made to establish responsibility for the murders so that, at the end of the war, the German officers,

gauleiters or Quisling Burgomasters who authorised these things, and the Gestapo murderers who actually carried them out, may be brought to justice.

They have just identified the body of an actress of the Ukrainian Opera House, Nina Belova. Shot through the head. With her was buried her purse with powder and lipstick and tram tickets in it and a portfolio containing a musical score of Tchaikovsky. It seemed as though she had been arrested when going to a concert and taken to this prison, from which she never came out alive.

I am shown the body of another girl of about twenty-five. She had been wearing a pretty, blue silk dress. Also shot through the back of the head.

Some of the bodies are contorted in agony. Others have their hands piously joined.

As I stand here in the midst of this Golgotha, these themes run through my head. . . . This might easily have been Folkestone or Winchester instead of Orel and had it been, the body of my wife or of your mother or mine might have been down there. . . . I wish some of those clever publicists and senators who 'proved' that the last war reports of German atrocities were all "British propaganda" were here now. . . . Oh, and the artist who did the drawing in the English comic paper that made me laugh so much about two maiden aunts looking out of an upper window and saying to the invading German soldier: "I say, my good man, when do the atrocities begin?"

I would like to have that artist along. And now I understand why the Russians get a little impatient over some of those schemes for 'redeeming' the poor misunderstood German people which some British and American papers still dabble in. I understand how, when you have seen a sight like this, your one desire is to get into Germany itself with fire and sword, and shoot the criminals who practice this sort of swinishness with your own hand. . . .

A blood-red sun is sinking behind the prison wall: inside, its whitewashed surface is still stained here and there with blood and pitted by bullets. This was the execution wall. The Germans, quite shameless about it, did not even trouble to clear up the

mess. The Gestapo portion of the prison has been dynamited. Neatly bisected, its cells are exposed to view. Survivors from this prison tell me that from some windows you saw executions carried out. Men were shot against the wall. Women were made to lie down first, then shot through the head. You always knew how many victims there would be because if five Gestapo men marched in, that meant five deaths—one shot from each revolver.

People were killed for all kinds of reasons, and some apparently for no reason at all, save that they were not worth transporting for labour into Germany. All Communists or persons prominent under Soviet rule were invariably liquidated.

Earlier to-day, I stood by an honourable grave—that of seventeen men of the 17th Soviet Tank Brigade who, using Churchill tanks, broke into Orel. They are buried in the Central Square where a Nazi gallows had stood for nearly two years. Their bodies lie in a mound over which a Soviet tank has been placed. The tank is covered with flowers and bears a brass plaque: "Eternal glory to the tank men who fell in freeing Orel."

As we approached the mound, accompanied by city officials, a broadcasting van of the Red Army played the "Internationale," and soldiers who were lying resting on the grass around stood to attention.

The Mayor, Mikhail Romashin, said that out of 13,000 houses in Orel about 6000 were brick or stone and of these hardly one remained undamaged. I saw for myself the meticulous care with which the Germans destroyed everything they could. Orel was once an elegant town with boulevards, Empire-style houses and many gardens. The villa of Turgenev must have been especially charming before it was looted. But the town will take years to recover. The Russians had to abandon it so fast in October, 1941, that they had time to demolish hardly anything. Orel fell to German parachutists and light tanks, virtually intact.

To-day, delayed action mines are going off all the time. Few houses are safe. The electricity and water supply are ruined and the main railway has been ingeniously ripped up by locomotives towing huge anchors, and by explosives, for many miles.

All the Jews in the city were killed, the Mayor said, and all girls from seventeen to twenty-four sent to Germany—about

14,000 in all. Only 30,000 remained in the town out of 114,000 when the Russians re-entered. The Germans did not try to run Orel's industries, but used one plant as a tank repair workshop.

German landlords with a few White Russians came with their wives and employed Russians as day labour for 200 grammes of bread daily. Deaths from starvation were high until the end of the first year, when the Russians managed to get a bare existence out of vegetable plots. In 1941, the Germans closed all schools, reopening them later, with only two junior classes. Education ended at twelve, when the children had to start work.

Mikhail Oktan, a Fascist of mysterious origin, was the Rosenberg of Orel, running the local paper and training teachers in Hitlerite doctrine. Only twenty-five teachers passed his test, and fled with him when the Germans left. The Germans used the medical clinic as a brothel. The Pokrovski Cathedral, which had been used for services during the Soviet regime, was used by the Germans as a storehouse, after they had taken down the great gold-hued dome and cupolas for scrap metal. A Cathedral priest, with a long grey beard and hair hanging on to his shoulders, named Ivan Makaveyev, told me the Germans forbade him to pray for Metropolitan Sergei in Moscow but ordered him to pray for Metropolitan Seraphim of Berlin. They put an ex-bank clerk over him as church administrator because they feared the church was a focal point of Russian patriotism at a time when no other meeting place was possible. This man delivered orders from the Gestapo.

A doctor named Sergei Protopopov, a professor of surgery, remained after the occupation to run a military hospital for Russian wounded. He told me the staple food for patients was spoiled soya beans plus 100 grammes of bread daily. Thirteen-year-old children were brought to hospital after being taken to the front to dig trenches and getting wounded there. There were 900 wounded in the hospital with 200 beds. When Protopopov protested, the Germans removed many patients in their bed attire on open peasant carts in thirty degrees of frost.

"They wouldn't say where they were taking them," said the doctor. "I never saw them again. They must have perished of cold anyhow."



Peter Kovalenko, a scientist aged twenty-seven, told me that a fourteen-year-old boy who ran away from forced labour was hanged on the main square in the presence of his mother.

In the villages around Orel, the devastation seems even more cruel. Every cottage is burned down, only the brick chimney still standing. The peasants are sitting hopelessly amid the ruins or trying to grind corn by primitive means. Nearly all the cattle have been driven away. I have never seen such misery as in this zone just abandoned by the Germans—children with stomachs inflated by starvation, half-naked men and young women with white hair.

For miles the fields are overgrown with weeds—uncultivated since the Germans came—but in some areas the crops are fair and already in stooks. And there is a good deal of food in vegetable gardens which the Germans could neither use nor destroy. On all sides of Orel there is a great danger from mines, of which 80,000 have already been discovered.

Passing through Mtsensk, I found that delayed action mines explode every day there, so that troops will not be permitted to occupy any house until forty-five days have gone by. Not a house remains whole. Mtsensk is a dead town, although people are still living in it in dug-outs.

The whole countryside has been gone through by these Nazi locusts who have torn and despoiled everything.

Should the Nazis retreat all the way into Poland in this fashion, the towns of Western Russia will all look like Pompeii. For all this, the Russians mean to make the Germans responsible pay in tears and blood.

*September 3rd, 1943.*—This is the battlefield of Karotich in the Ukraine where 200 Soviet and German tanks and mobile guns were mixed up in a deadly combat which has left this once-smiling countryside a blackened graveyard of fields and farm buildings. Nazi tanks and "Ferdinands" are littered about in the apple orchards and on the fields of rye. And the German dead lie where they fell—dead of wounds received when their tanks were hit, or else machine-gunned as they jumped from their burning vehicles. There the Third German Panzer

Division was smashed and the "Reich" S.S. Armoured Division which supported it badly knocked about.

The battle has not long ceased, but the same Soviet tanks which won this victory are engaged in another, farther south. They have taken Mereyfa, about six miles from where I am standing, and are pursuing the retreating Germans farther down a corridor only one mile wide through which they escaped hence. The booming of Russian artillery supporting this new tank push comes to me plainly on the south wind. Overhead, a German plane circles, trying to detect the movements of Russian motorised infantry following up the tanks. It has been raining torrentially. The black Ukrainian earth is already transformed into foot-deep mud ; yet the offensive goes on.

This battle took place all over the "Commune" State Farm and made a shambles of it, but already a few peasants have emerged from their hiding places and are pathetically trying to knock together a few old doors and window frames to afford some shelter from the driving rain and cold wind. But they have to walk warily, for the whole area is mined and we correspondents who have already had three of our party killed and one wounded on a mine on our way up here, are equally cautious. The mining all the way from Bielgorod to Kharkov is prodigious. Thousands upon thousands of mines and booby-traps have been lifted, but the sappers cannot deal with them all, so tragedies are bound to occur, even far behind the existing front.

Ours took place near Bielgorod. We had flown from Moscow in a big Douglas, escorted part of the way by Yak Seven fighters, and transferred into 'jeeps' to complete the journey to the front. Driving through desolate country shortly before midnight, the second 'jeep' of our convoy struck an anti-tank mine. In the pitch dark there was an explosion like sheet lightning and the 'jeep' was thrown ten yards off the track.

It contained Mikhail Vasev, Acting Chief of the Foreign Office Press Department ; Victor Kozemianko, also of the Press Department and Major Volkhov, a conducting officer. The Major and Kozemianko lost both their legs and died before we could get them to hospital. The driver escaped miraculously with a head wound and shock, but Vasev's body could not be found.

So we decided to sleep on the track in the 'jeeps' until dawn.

The night passed sadly and wearily with German bombers droning over us in one direction and Soviet bombers going on missions in the opposite direction. Vasev, who was affectionately known to many correspondents as "Sliding Billy Watson," owing to his fancied resemblance to an American comedian of that name, had first declined to take Marjorie Shaw of the *London Daily Mirror* on the trip because he said it might be dangerous for a woman correspondent. But finally he relented. Marjorie was much affected by the thought that the danger from which he had tried to shield her had overtaken him instead.

At dawn we found poor Vasev's body. It was thirty yards away from the spot where the mine exploded and he was not recognisable. We arranged for his body to be taken back to Moscow and continued on our way towards the front under the guidance of another conducting officer who survived.

So here we are in the wake of the Soviet advance from Kharkov and not far behind the thrashing propellers—the tank brigades—which are driving the Steppe Army of General Konev forward.

Lieutenant-Colonel George Kushnikov, a thirty-five-year-old veteran of the 5th Tank Army, has come to tell us about the battle of Karotich which he directed from an observation post nearby.

"Another Colonel who actually fought a tank in this battle was to have been here," apologised Kushnikov, who smokes an underslung pipe, sports eyebrows as bushy as a pair of moustaches and looks a thoroughly tough baby, "but I'm afraid he'd had to go forward to join the battle you hear going on now.

"Well, the enemy left sixty tanks here when we had finished with him but, as you know, we use their tanks and they are using ours, so we were able to repair thirty of his and use them against him. They're taking part in that battle now. We used mostly K.V. tanks and T.34s. On our flank we had infantry who had some Churchills and Matildas, but we use foreign tanks as infantry tanks, as you know—not with our armoured brigades. Well, the Germans, after leaving Kharkov, were massing here for a counter-attack. They had motorised infantry on that rising ground over there. Our tanks came out of Kharkov along that

line of hills to the north there, on the other side of the River Udy. We took the village you can see called Peresechnaya and by night we crossed the river and approached the Germans from the north-west. They did not like that because they had dug positions facing north-east, towards Kharkov, but we were not going to do anything so obvious as to come out of Kharkov along the road, as they seemed to expect. However, they had a number of Ferdinands and they pasted us as we came at them. But a Ferdinand is pretty obvious in open country like this and our air force went at them. By the time my tanks got within range, the Ferdinands had been quieted down a bit by the bombing.

"We opened fire at 1500 yards," he continued. "The battle raged for five hours. It was bloody, as you can see. We closed to within 800 yards at one stage. We had air superiority all the time so when German planes tried to lend a hand our aircraft kept them off us. Tanks were fighting on the ground and planes in the air simultaneously in great masses, and the noise was appalling. After the end, only about forty German tanks were fit to move. And they started hopping it. They left a lot of mines behind them and made off down the corridor to Mereyfa. However, we'll catch them yet."

We looked over the Tigers and Ferdinands which had been de-mined and were safe to approach. In one, the crew had burned to death. In another they had managed to jump out, but the neighbourhood was littered with their clothing and personal belongings including recent letters from Germany. Their clothes had evidently been torn off ablaze.

One Tiger had its gun knocked to heaven by a direct hit. The damage done by Russian 75-millimetre guns on the Tigers at such close range was severe. Even when shots had not penetrated, a hit on the turret or tracks had made the tank unserviceable.

In a cottage half-hidden amidst a field of giant sunflowers, from which the Ukrainians make sunflower oil, we were received by Colonel Ivan Voroviev, who said: "Gentlemen, I am here by command of General Konev to tell you all I can."

Voroviev, an old Czarist officer with a close-cropped head, a stocky body and a very positive way of talking, said: "What you

are seeing is only part of the huge operations which are proceeding all the way from Spasi-Demiansk to Taganrog in which we are achieving over hundreds of miles what the Germans failed to achieve on a narrow front when they attacked the Kursk salient. German officers taken prisoner around Kharkov have told me they are under orders to retreat all the way to the Dnieper."

Answering questions about the Allied equipment used in this offensive, Voroviev said: "The long-range bombers we are using are American and of course the jeep we have everywhere—we regard it almost as a weapon, and take it right into the trenches. Some Matilda, Churchill and General Grant tanks are being used to support our infantry and American tommy-guns—very good reports of these, but we would like more ammunition for them. You see, we use tommy-guns rather heavily." (That I could see, for even a couple of sentries guarding the cottage where we slept carried tommy-guns instead of rifles.)

"Of course our army here is using much American food," he continued—"sausages, lard, canned meat and some sugar. There are no complaints about American food, I may say. Our soldier's food is really the tops—900 grammes of bread daily, for example."

Voroviev said he thought enemy morale had greatly deteriorated.

"Giving him a good thrashing is really the best way of lowering a German's morale," he added, with a broad smile. "For example, the 39th Infantry Division was smashed near Kharkov. Of some 10,000 men only 600 remain and they have been re-formed into groups of sixty men apiece with a ratio of one German to three or four Czechs, Poles, Belgians and some Frenchmen. Prisoners we have taken quite often say 'Hitler Kaput.' Their uniforms are much worse than before and many haven't any underwear at all."

*Kharkov, September 5th, 1943.*

In the great city of Kharkov, every building is a house of cards. At first sight it still looks like a city fit to house a million inhabitants, but when you approach close you see that each

house is just an empty shell : one puff and it seems that the walls must collapse.

Fortunately, not more than a quarter of a million are in the city now, or housing would become an acute problem. But hundreds can be seen along the roads, walking in on foot pushing hand-carts with their personal belongings. They want to come home, even though there is no home to go to.

Receiving me in the Town Hall, the Mayor, Alexander Selivanov, said that, during the first occupation, it was estimated that 40 per cent of the houses were ruined, but now it was between 60 and 70 per cent. The Mayor is thirty-five. He wears a black blouse of Stalin type, and has a manner suited to his job, which is the equivalent of a big business executive. He was once a locksmith. He was very tired when I saw him, but said that despite the shocking devastation, which surpasses anything an aerial blitz could have done, he was confident of getting Kharkov back on its feet.

The railway is already open to Kupiansk and also to the north, and he said the Moscow-Bielgorod line would be clear in a few days. Some water is available, although most still comes from wells. In the streets one saw neatly-dressed women struggling along under a yoke, with twin pails of water on it.

"The Government of the Ukrainian Republic is functioning here," added Selivanov. "Kharkov is the temporary capital. The majority of houses in the centre of the city will have to be demolished. Our sky-scraper Palace of Industry and the largest hotel will probably have to be razed. But the first thing is to get industry working again. Every factory which has even two walls still standing will be restored. The workers are here already.

"Some of the machinery evacuated in 1941 will be brought back : raw materials are available now to start work in some plants, and before long smoke will be pouring out of our chimneys again. We are issuing 500 grammes of bread daily per head. We've got hospital beds for 3000 and we are looking after the people's relaxation. Five cinemas are open and when the Germans were still only twelve miles from the town the theatre reopened with Lepeshinskaya, one of Russia's finest ballerinas, and a first-class orchestra. We give concerts daily. You'll notice

many small kiosks selling fruit and vegetables. That's private trade, started by a number of unemployed people during the occupation as a means of keeping body and soul together. I am not interfering with them," said the Mayor, "but I think that as soon as industry gets going they will be going back to the jobs they had before. Professors and doctors have been selling things in the streets. The twenty-three schools remaining out of 130 are reopening next week."

The main menace now is from booby traps or 'surprises,' as the Russians call them, and every now and then large mines go off in the ruined buildings. I visited one of the de-mining headquarters which the Red Army has in the town, where Captain Alexander Danilovitch showed me some of 5000 lethal devices he and his sappers had already extracted, including booby traps lodged in pianos and a bomblet that might be called a 'sitzkrieg special' since it goes off inside the upholstery of a sofa when you sit down. In the gardens, the Germans placed mines made of concrete to save metal and shaped like a tent peg with a trip wire attached.

Danilovitch showed me a flame-thrower like a dust-bin which sprays a flame ninety feet. Sixty-six of these were found in one lumber mill.

As the 8th Army found in North Africa, so here in Kharkov the Red Army found some dead soldiers, both Russian and German, with booby traps tied to their bodies, Danilovitch told me.

Not only is the city full of mines, but the surrounding countryside which was fought over is, of course, covered with them. On the German defences north-west of the city I met Sergeant Peter Vokinov, a Bessarabian, who had lifted 1605 mines personally. A Colonel told me some 70,000 mines had been lifted in the approaches to Kharkov up to then.

These German defences were very impressive. In a bottling factory on the side of a hill, the Germans had ingeniously linked their trenches with the basement of a factory and also with cottages behind, so that the whole hillside about a mile long was burrowed into one large Nazi rabbit warren. The Germans had torn bits off the wooden cottages to reinforce their defences and

made firing holes in the windows with radiators and bricks removed from the houses.

As soon as the Germans retreated, peasants came out and dragged pieces of their homes out of the trenches, putting them back where they belonged. But one family could not do this. The wood of their home had been put into a German dug-out which Russian shells had destroyed. The mother, grandmother and a small boy sat in the garden.

"We have come home, but our home is no more," the mother said.

Indeed, all they had was a stove, a tin wash-basin and the flowers in the garden; but as we passed the little boy picked some and making them into a posy ran after us, pressing us to accept them. We had nothing to give him but when he saw an empty English cigarette tin, he asked for that.

Running off delighted with this piece of scrap, he began playing with it. In his imagination it rapidly became a Soviet tank.

Alexei Tolstoy of the Soviet Atrocities Commission is at work in Kharkov and, as at Orel, there is plenty for him to do. Mayor Selivanov told me that the S.S. behaved "like wild beasts" when they came to Kharkov the second time and that generally the second occupation was worse than the first. However, there were no public hangings the second time, probably on account of hostile demonstrations. People were shot discreetly instead. During the first days in some apartment houses forty to fifty people were shot in each, the Mayor said.

I spoke with Professor Alex. Tereschenko, Professor Peter Krassovsky and Professor Ivan Katkov, distinguished scientists of the city, who experienced both occupations and all confirmed the following atrocity which occurred in the first days of the second occupation. Here is Katkov's story:

"I was in charge of the hospital for Russian wounded. On March 12, the Germans inspected the hospital and next day we were told we could continue to work and that the hospital would be reserved for Russians. Other wounded were sent to us until we had four hundred in one wing, three hundred in another. At four p.m. on March 12, three cars from the Adolf Hitler S.S.



Division drove up. The occupants locked the hospital doors and threw incendiary bombs inside. The building caught fire. The wounded who tried to get out were shot down with tommy-guns. This wing was burned down completely and all inside perished. The S.S. then went to the other wing and shot all the patients in the basement who had been placed there for shelter from bombing. General Standinger was commandant of Kharkov at the time, I hold him responsible. In another hospital on Feuerbach Square, one hundred wounded were shot in the same fashion. Altogether three hundred were burned to death, and four hundred shot in my hospital."

The professors agreed that a man named Meier, chief of the Labour Exchange and known as "the Hangman of Kharkov," was guilty of the worst brutalities.

At the same time, corruption was marked among the Germans. An art-loving colonel named Scholz specialised in commandeering apartments in person and admiring paintings on the walls; whereupon, if the tenants offered him one, he would usually forbear to evict them. Every German had his price. You could even escape deportation for between five and ten thousand roubles, with the rouble at ten to one mark.

In May, the Germans' brutal attitude softened, apparently with the object of recruiting Ukrainians into a Russian traitor army which the Germans were trying to form. The Germans boasted that they would raise half a million Russians to fight against the Red Army, but although on May 2nd a Hitler order was published in all the German-run Ukrainian-language newspapers stressing that Russian prisoners were to be well treated and receive the same food as German troops, and although German officials began a flirtation with civilians, even permitting persons assaulted by German soldiers to lodge complaints against them, the Ukrainians found it impossible to change their attitude to the invaders and the popular slogan was: "Stalin in twenty-five years could not have made us hate the Germans more than Hitler has done in two."

*September 6th, 1943.*—In a Ukrainian village, I broke the news to Anna, the Red Army girl from the Urals, that the Allies were operating on the European mainland at last. Polite but unen-

thusiastic, Anna asked: "What are they doing there, dropping bombs, I suppose?"

"No," I replied. "They have invaded Italy; they are fighting on land."

Anna brightened. "Good luck to them," she said.

Then, an afterthought. "Are they fighting *Germans*?"

"Not many, so far."

"Will this draw off any German divisions from our front?"

"Perhaps, but not necessarily so."

"Then," Anna replied firmly, "it is not a Second Front, is it?"

Here, one can see with one's own eyes how serious for Germany the loss of this rich Ukrainian soil, which the Germans even before Hitler have coveted, must be. Even after two years of Nazi occupation and under war conditions, the Ukraine is swimming in plenty. And the truth is that the Germans have been extracting considerable wealth from it. The Russians demolished all they could in 1941, but you cannot burn the rich black earth nor liquidate the rich, black coal and the Germans have been getting coal from the Donbas and wheat, meat and vegetables from the Ukrainian countryside, so that their army was not only locally self-supporting but also Ukrainian food was being sent by lateral railway lines to other German armies in the north and what remained was being sent back to Germany. Now this spoliation is being stopped.

In the village of Lipty where I spent last night, the Germans left so hurriedly that they had no time to fire the cottages, but they pulled up all the vegetables they could, especially the onions, to take with them. But they could not take them all. A market is going on now and there are piles of tomatoes, melons, apples, pumpkins, plums and peaches for sale, and in the field, wheat and sweet corn are being gathered in. All the work is being done by women or small boys. There is not a man in the place. They are all at the front.

Lipty has been lucky. Other villages I have passed near the front have suffered burning and pillage. Indeed, coming here by air, you realise in a series of profound shocks how enormous is the

devastated area in once-occupied Russia. The whole face of Russia for hundreds of miles where the Germans have once been is pocked and pitted with trenches, gun-emplacements and anti-tank ditches. Near Moscow, you see from the air villages entirely surrounded with trenches.

Near Voronezh, another of these cities which looks whole from a distance but is actually a Pompeii, there are still mine-fields. At Vailuki, there is still barbed wire and pillboxes. Kupiansk is bad, but Bielgorod is the worst thing I have yet seen in Russia—a Tobruk of a place with smashed German tanks and even aircraft lying in the streets, and mines and the smell of death everywhere.

These places are hundreds of miles apart, but the pattern is the same—ruin to house and field and the ever present danger of mines.

It may be years before the last mine laid in Russia explodes. Twenty years or more after peace comes, Russian kids will still have trenches and dugouts to play in, just as the Martello towers on our south coast remind us of Napoleon.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### RUSSIA SEES THE END IN SIGHT

*September 9th, 1943.*

FOR THE FEW people who had heard the foreign wireless, last night's big jollification in the streets of Moscow to celebrate the liberation of the Donbas was a double celebration, but most Muscovites didn't hear about the capitulation of Italy until nearly midnight.

I went out into Red Square with my Italian flag taken in Africa and had a bit of a celebration on my own until the passers-by, learning the reason for my peculiar behaviour, joined in. As the guns boomed and rockets lit up the night sky and loud-speakers blared patriotic tunes, people who heard that the Rome-Berlin axis was no more could be heard repeating: "This is the beginning of the end."

It was six days ago that the news reached Moscow that Italy had accepted the terms laid down by Britain, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. During a luncheon given by Molotov for Gusev, the new Ambassador to Britain, a telegram arrived announcing the good news and Molotov and the British Ambassador, Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr, went informally into conference then and there. The Russians, as might be expected, maintained exemplary secrecy regarding what had happened. Not a word leaked out in Moscow and I doubt that even newspaper editors heard about it. From reading the newspapers, at least, one would never have supposed any such culmination was imminent. Rather the reverse, because the continued editorial emphasis on the absence of a Second Front against Germany seemed to imply regret that further time was being wasted in fighting Italy. So the first reaction here was gladness that, with Italy out of the way, the Allies would be able to concentrate everything on the real European enemy. But even when the Axis falls apart, the Soviet papers don't depart from their invariable practice of putting all foreign

news on the back page. However, *Pravda* carries a significant editorial on page 1 to the effect that it was on the Russian front that not only Germany but also her satellites were ground down and recalling that Italy lost some of her best divisions, including some 200,000 men, against the Red Army.

"The blows at Hitler's army at Orel and Bielgorod knocked Mussolini from his saddle and precipitated the crisis of Italian Fascism," says *Pravda*. "The Soviet people feel a rightful pride over the new victory in the Donbas coupled with the joyful news of Italy's surrender. The enemy is growing weaker and is on the eve of complete collapse. We are confident that the moment of complete victory is approaching."

The happiest people in all Moscow last night seemed to be the officers of the French 'Normandie' Fighter Squadron, who were staying in the Metropole Hotel on leave. But they took a rather poor view of my Italian flag. I took it into the little dining-room where foreigners eat and Alexander Werth, Marjorie Shaw and Harold King thought it a good idea that we should eat our supper of cold sausages, tea and 'Pirojni' (pastries) off it. So we used the flag as a tablecloth and were just broaching a bottle of Soviet champagne when the French officers came in.

The squadron commander stared at it with a look of extreme distaste. Then, coming over to me, he said very politely: "Excuse me, monsieur, but I can think of a better use for your trophy there. Will you be so good as to place it *par terre*?"

I obliged him; and with great satisfaction the French officers, one after another, walked upon the Italian flag and dug their heels into the emblem of the treacherous House of Savoy.

September 10th, 1943.—"War aims? What is that?"

Katerina Feodorovna puckered her pretty brows while I explained that this was something which people in Britain and the United States wrote to the papers and made speeches about.

Twenty-six, with fair curls hanging on to her shoulders and a small intellectual face, Katerina wore Red Army uniform at the beginning of the war, and saw active service, but now she has been called out of the army to do important scientific work. She is expert in the treatment of steels in their various uses as armour.

Katerina is not a "typical Soviet girl" but she is the kind of girl other Russian girls make a bit of a heroine out of—a "responsible worker" with high academic attainments, but at the same time attractive, fond of pretty clothes, dancing and ski-ing and knowing French and English. Her favourite authors are Hemingway, Erskine Caldwell and, oddly enough, John Galsworthy—especially—*The Forsyte Saga*, after whose heroine she named her dog "Fleur."

"I understand," said Katerina, as we walked down the Kuznetsky Most, the Bond Street of old Moscow where now the best bookshops are. We looked into the windows but failed to find any books about war aims, although there were plenty on war experiences.

"In 1940, when the Germans were bombing you every night and invasion might have come at any moment, did the English people talk a lot about war aims?" asked Katerina.

"No," I replied. "Our one aim then was to survive."

"For two years we have felt just like that," said Katerina, "and we have not yet reached the stage—perhaps we never shall—when we can afford time to sit back and indulge in a national debate about what we are going to do with our victory. It is still a long way from being won. All the same, I expect our government has plans ready in case the Hitlerites should collapse unexpectedly soon. I think our government knows what to do with the Germans when we have beaten them. Perhaps your government is not so sure?"

I said that people in Britain as a whole were by no means sure not only how to handle Germany but how their own domestic life was to be governed after the war.

"Ah, yes—the Plan Beveridge," interposed Katerina. "I have heard about that. Of course, one big difference is that for us the issue is simpler—we know just how we are going to run our own life after the war. So it is enough for us to have just one aim in the war—to throw the Hitlerites out of our country and with other freedom-loving peoples see to it that German Fascism never rises again, and then we can go ahead undisturbed in the one job that matters to us—making the Soviet Union the finest and most advanced country in the world.

"For twenty-five years," added Katerina, "the Soviet people have been trying to do just that, but never without interference from other people—first the civil war and the intervention, then the struggle with counter-revolutionary elements within Russia culminating in the murder of Kirov and widespread sabotage of the building of socialism by men who, as the great treason trials have shown, were linked up with foreign imperialists.

"Then," she continued, "hardly had all these dangers been eliminated and the first Five-Year Plan completed ahead of time, than Fascism began to rise up close to their frontiers and they were obliged to stop short their finest work and concentrate everything on building up the biggest army in the world, because they knew it would not be long before the Fascists would attack them. The better life people had been working for for so long—more housing and consumers goods and shorter hours of labour—all this had to be curtailed so that the U.S.S.R. could surpass the West, not in culture and production as they had hoped to do, but in military might.

"And that is what makes us sometimes so bitter," she said. "All Western Russia will be a heap of ruins when we have thrown the Hitlerites out and we will have to start building afresh from the ground up. What the Germans did in France in the last war is nothing to the way they have devastated our country.

"And it is all so unnecessary! Just think how rich and splendid our country might have been by now if these crazy Fascists had never lived! And the suffering they have caused to our people—how can they ever pay for that?"

I said I had seen the mass graves in Orel, the gutted villages, the peasants left to starve.

Katerina said: "Well, *there* is one Russian war aim for you—just to bring all this dreadful suffering to an end. Isn't that almost enough in itself? Just take my case. I am lucky, I get good rations because I do special work. Many people aren't nearly so well off as me, but that first winter in Moscow . . ." She faltered. "We have never talked of it, but now things are better it does no harm to think back. In my building in January and February there was no heat. The Germans had the coalfields

and we had not had time to get in wood as we have now. The temperature reached thirty below in my apartment. The water froze. The only thing to do was to stay in bed. Food got low. For weeks I lived on dry bread and tea. Then there was my dog Fleur . . .”

“You couldn’t feed her,” I said. “Why on earth didn’t you kill her?”

Katerina smiled knowingly: “Kill my radiator? Oh dear, no. I kept her alive on part of my bread because when I was in bed she lay on top of me under the coats and kept a little warmth in my body. Somehow we got through that winter. My husband was at the front. For a year I didn’t see or hear from him. Two boy cousins I had been brought up with were killed, and my aunt was in occupied territory. To this day, I don’t know if she is alive. Don’t think I am grumbling. I was lucky, so I know what it was like for the others. . . . Hitler brought misery into every home in Russia. He killed four million of our best men. For that, the German Fascist chiefs and all the responsible officials and officers under them who have committed crimes in the Soviet Union must be killed.”

I asked how Katerina would deal with them if she had her way?

“Why, hang them, of course. Shooting is too good. You have seen the Krasnodar film?”

I assented. The film shows the trial and public hanging of Russian traitors who connived with the Gestapo in the murder of Russian civilians in ‘murder wagons’ (sealed trucks into which the exhaust gases are introduced, killing those thrown inside whilst being driven to a common grave).

“You know, we never used to hang people in the Soviet Union until Krasnodar,” Katerina said. “We had to reintroduce hanging then, and that is how we will deal with the Hitlerite gangsters, after a fair trial—which is better than they deserve because, after all, the guilt of a man like Himmler is self-evident.”

What of devastated Russia? I asked. How could the Germans redeem that?

Katerina’s eyes lit up eagerly as she said: “That really



interests me because I am a factory worker and I love my factory, with the smoke pouring out and the beautiful machinery. Hundreds of such factories have been ruined. Well, here is what I would do. You know how we moved scores of factories all the way to the Urals? Well, if that was possible, why not move the machinery of German factories, which have been working for nothing but slaughter, into the Soviet Union where we would use it to build up peace and prosperity? Every machine they smashed here I would make the Germans replace and I would see that it was the best and latest type too!"

"I think you've got something there, Katerina," said I, "but meanwhile pass the tip to the R.A.F. to leave a few decent factories unbombed."

*September 13th, 1943.*—Would that I might write a Second Front article to end all Second Front articles. During the last two months, scarce a paper in the Soviet Union that has not carried one or more editorials or signed articles stressing once again the need for the Allies to make a real front against Germany in the West. In a revue at the Ermitage Theatre there is even a Second Front joke—a foreigner complains about the shortage of watches in Moscow and the comedian comes back: "True, but when you do get a Russian watch, you'll see it shows the time always more advanced than in London or Washington"—which in Russian sounds very neat and brings down the house.

Soviet papers reiterate that what they mean is not the engagement of two German divisions, as in Sicily, but a major effort that might draw off fifty-sixty German divisions. Until such a Second Front comes, we must expect such articles to appear. I don't think there is anything calculated or subtle about them, that they are part of a huge deception scheme to make the Germans think that no Second Front is coming when all the time it is just around the corner or anything like that. I believe they are spontaneous and natural enough in the circumstances and there is nothing that Britons or Americans can do about them except to strive harder than ever to speed the day which will make their incidence obsolete. But looking at this situation from Moscow, there do seem to be a few things that Britons and Americans might with advantage *abstain* from doing meanwhile.

Leave off making excuses for not producing a Second Front, to start with. Why apologise for the inevitable? Surely, no Briton or American, save potential fifth-columnists whom the police presumably have eyes on, would suggest to-day that it is not essential to produce a Second Front at the earliest possible moment? Whence it follows that the only reason why one has not started already is that the essential preparations just are not complete. If we are doing the best we can, do not let us apologise, still less advance the idea that this or that subsidiary effort of ours really constitutes a secondary Second Front, if only the Russians could see it that way. . . .

The Russians do not see it that way. And they are right. They give full weight to our bombing of Germany, to the two and a half years we were obliged to spend in Africa, chiefly liquidating the Italian Empire, to our life and death struggle against the U-boats. But none of these things is a substitute for that second land front against Germany which we and they and the Americans all agree is essential.

The Russians know that except for that brief campaign in 1940, when twelve British divisions met the Germans in France and Belgium, the British Army has yet to come to grips with the German Army in this war. No shame in that. We have had a multitude of preliminary hurdles to clear. We were like a boxer who has been training a long time to meet the heavyweight champion of the world. So let us complete our training in dignity and silence—don't let us say: "Gee, Mom, I am going to lick the pants off that champ, but meanwhile winning the ping-pong tournament and coming out top at Badminton was pretty swell, wasn't it?"

The Russians are very polite people. They are also very sensitive. They often will not tell when they are disappointed. But they think their own thoughts. Of course the Soviet government knows what London and Washington intend to do, but the ordinary Soviet citizen does not. Like ourselves, he knows only what he reads in the papers. And if by now he is fed up with reading Anglo-American statements that sound like excuses for the absence of a Second Front, I do not think any Briton or American here in Russia will blame him.

Yet far be it from me to suggest that Britons are particularly at fault in this respect. On the contrary, I believe that of all the United Nations, Britain best understands Russia to-day.

*Red Star* to-day commends the attitude of the *Sunday Express* towards the Second Front and takes to task the *New York Herald-Tribune* for saying that the Allies are already pinning down in Western Europe and the Balkans fifty-five German divisions.

"Does any one suppose?" asked *Red Star*, "that if the Germans really thought an Allied invasion was imminent, they would keep only thirty-five divisions in France and the low countries and another ten in Norway? Of course not. They would keep at least a hundred in the West. . . ."

*Red Star* deplores the alleged policy of holding some German divisions in the West "by threat of invasion" at a time when the victories of the Red Army in the East have made it less difficult than ever before to pin down really substantial numbers by going over from words and threats to deeds.

So I think more restraint and much more imagination is called for from Allied spokesmen who feel obliged to speak about Russia at this time. More allowance should be made for the fact that Russia has lost four million dead and had one-third of her people under German bondage. Little things, well-meant but clumsily said, may give offence, and as for those gross offenders like the *Chicago Tribune*, Mrs. Cissy Patterson's *Washington Herald*, and some of those still unrepentent Isolationist Congressmen—what can one say about them, save that every time they sound off about Russia they are doing Goebbels' work?

One of the freedoms we are fighting for is freedom for the citizen to stand up and criticise the King of England or the President of the United States if he sees fit. But should this freedom be extended into a right to sneer at an ally or suggest that as the price of 'aid' received, the Soviet Union ought to modify her social system or make concessions towards "the American way of life"—whatever that may mean, but which Russians identify as simply unrestricted private enterprise—the antithesis of their system which they believe has established its value for all time in this terrible war?

Russians understand how different from ours is their con-

ception of free speech and a free Press. But when paper as a munition of war is government controlled, they must sometimes wonder why it should be made available to people whose chief delight seems to be to make mischief between the Allies.

In Russia, I think it is true to say that any citizen who publicly defamed an ally would be arrested forthwith. Fortunately, the troublemakers are small in number. The merely thoughtless seem more numerous.

We would do well to remember that the Russians have abundantly proved themselves in this war. . . .

It is not they who now stand before the bar of history : it is we British and Americans. The obligation and the opportunity is on our side. They look to us. We can ask no more of them.

Nothing must be allowed to come between us, for if through disunity we lose this peace also, then the dead of two wars will have died in vain.

So can we not make a Three-Power pact to waste no more words about the Second Front until the morning after the glad day on which we launch one ?

*September 20th, 1943.*—I am going home on leave at last. I hope to return here and see out the rest of the war on the Eastern front. While I am packing I reflect on the immense improvement that has been wrought here in these four months.

The menace to Moscow has been removed for always.

Except for rationing and overcrowding, Moscow is now back to normal. And at the front, staff officers have told me they consider Germany's offensive power against Russia has been permanently broken : local counter-offensives, they feel, are still possible for the Germans, but never again another Stalingrad, or even another Kursk.

The Russian artillery has always been superior to the German and probably the best in the world. Russian tanks have been just as good. But now the whole army feels it is on top of the German army and superior in equipment, numbers and morale. The individual Russian peasant-soldier feels he is a better man than the German—hardier, more cunning in field craft and with greater endurance.

This feeling leads to fanatical feats of bravery which no

Japanese dying for his emperor could surpass ; like that of Alexander Matrosov, nineteen-year-old Komsomol lad who joined a guards regiment and was posthumously made a Hero of the Soviet Union for this feat : Seeing many of his tommy-gun unit being shot down by a lone machine-gun firing from a pill-box before a village, and realising that this one gun was holding up the whole advance, Matrosov rushed the pillbox and smothered the embrasure from which the gun was firing with his own body. Before he slipped to the ground riddled with bullets his comrades had time to rush up and enter the pillbox.

Matrosov's regiment was renamed after him and at each roll-call his name was called out, followed by a commemorative silence.

Honours such as this ; the award of battle honours of the cities they have captured to various divisions—for example, eighteen infantry divisions were so honoured for the Donbas, ten for Kharkov and five for Orel and Bielgorod—all this is breeding a new martial enthusiasm and pride among the Russian people. Voltaire would approve of the summary treatment meted out to generals who fall down on the job. But for those who succeed, nothing is too good. A pilot of the French Normandie Squadron, speaking to me of his Russian comrades, said : " They all dream of becoming heroes of the Soviet Union. . . . "

For a Hero of the Soviet Union is a great figure with many privileges and a monument erected at his birthplace.

The great events of the last two months naturally preoccupy most Russians to the exclusion of most else, but I do not think they will be found ungenerous in tributes to their Allies' achievements a little later on.

The ceaseless spate of articles advocating a direct Second Front against Germany during recent weeks is, I think, explained by the fact that the Russians believe that were such a front started, Germany could be smashed this winter. Now they feel Germany can detach sufficient divisions from her reserves in Central Europe, without withdrawing any divisions from Russia, to keep us busy in Italy for some time. And this must postpone the final reckoning until next year.

Looking ahead, the best guidance to Russian strategy is to be

found in Stalin's own words, or in the periodic official statements by the Soviet Information Bureau. The famous declaration on the second anniversary of the German invasion: "Without a Second Front, victory over Hitlerite Germany is impossible," deserves closer analysis to-day in the light of the summer's victories. The phrase should not be taken alone but considered alongside the slogan with which every Red Army man goes into battle, which is that he is fighting "to free Soviet soil from the German Fascist invader." His progress towards this latter objective has been so rapid that it is quite possible now to conceive a situation in which Soviet soil, or at least the greatest part of it, might be freed before the Second Front is opened in the west.

So I think the Russians quite sincere in their advice to us to hasten the Second Front whilst their own offensive is in full flood, for obviously our task would then be much easier than if it were begun at a period when there was an operative pause on the Eastern front.

If to-day we have difficulty in establishing ourselves at Salerno with a supposedly passive population and against a few German divisions, how much harder would invasion become if there were a lull in the East which might permit the Germans to remove divisions thence to throw against us?

Again, I think there is genuine solicitude in Russia that we should not again miss the bus with our final invasion of Europe, as we did in Norway. For although this war is officially designated here "The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union" whose chief objective is to throw the Nazis back where they come from, Russians know that the continent can finally be freed from German domination only by simultaneous offensives from East and West.

It were better for all the Allies that the liberation of the Soviet Union and of the rest of Europe should be one co-ordinated campaign—not a see-saw effort, with the pressure exerted first on one side, then on the other.

So that Russia riding high should be a greater stimulus to us, in our own interests, than Russia in difficulties. Leaving Moscow that seems to me to be the paramount lesson for us in the West.

## FINALE

AND so I passed out of Russia. . . .

After several false starts, when we would go out to Moscow airport at dawn after saying farewell to every one, and then return crestfallen after breakfast because the weather was too bad, we finally got under way and in less than four hours were at Stalingrad. We were a nicely assorted company—Admiral Duncan, the American Naval Attaché; Air Vice-Marshal Babington; Janet Weaver, the charming correspondent of the *New York Daily Worker* and her husband; Robert Megidoff, American broadcaster of Russian birth—and we pressed on through Astrakhan to Teheran and then by American transport plane down to the Persian Gulf at Abadan (where it was 107 in the shade), and so to Cairo (where it was only three degrees less).

Although the Mediterranean by this time was wide open, the Allies were still running the old route through Africa and so I set forth in a Belgian Lockheed plane to fly down the long ribbon of the Nile up which I had passed some two and a half years earlier to Khartoum, and then to Entebbe on Lake Victoria. I spent a pleasant night at Kampala as I had done on my way out among old friends who happened to be passing up, or down, that long line of communications which has taken so many thousands of men through the Middle East since the war began. Then we flew over the mountains of the Congo to Stanleyville, motored out to see Stanley Falls with a pleasant Belgian woman who had conducted thousands of wartime transients, from Beverley Nichols to General Alexander, over the local sights since the war began; and then over an infinity of jungle, in which herds of elephants in the clearings looked no larger than fleas, to Bangwe and Ubangi, where the French and Belgians lived and ate in what seemed to me a far more civilised manner than the English do in Africa—on, on to Lagos and its prim suburbs so much resembling the

purlieus of Aldershot and so, by flying-boat, up the west coast of Africa to Lisbon.

How green and blue and gold and odorous with heat was my last memory of Africa! We descended on the way at Port Etienne. Blue towers a mile or two distant marked the Spanish frontier and the crisp shore and sharp line of sea-horizon were just like Egypt. Obvious, yet compelling, came the thought that one might go from here across the continent to Mena House on desert all the way!

From a broken wooden pier French sailors and men of the R.A.F. were catching sardines, indifferent to the competition of the diving gulls who often carried off their prey beneath their noses.

Coming ashore, myself and two flying companions tore off our hot, rumpled clothes and ran naked into the sea. We found two R.A.F. boys in the water and I asked them: "Any sharks?"

"Only little ones," said one boy reassuringly. "They can't bite much. . . ."

So we went in up to our waists at least and had what we all pronounced to be the most delicious swim of all our lives.

Then back into the brave Sunderland boat which, with a fair wind, bore us to Lisbon at 190 miles an hour.

There elapsed two days of waiting in what is surely the most luxurious city now left in the world. The shops were filled with gold watches, perfumes saved from the ravaging of France; and at a super-cinema was running *In Which We Serve* of Noel Coward, re-styled with an appropriate Latinity which contrived also to incorporate some Churchillian gusto—*Blood, Tears and Sweat*.

The excitement of most of us, all homecomers after long periods overseas, was now almost too great to be borne. We took off from the Tagus at two o'clock in the morning and at dawn found ourselves over the west of Ireland. We came down upon a wet, greengirt estuary and trooped into a warm Irish inn for bacon and eggs and coffee in front of an open fire.

There is something very foreign about Eire, so that I cannot think any Englishman could consider himself 'home already' when he landed there. Yet I was savouring the preliminary effluvia of England over my breakfast and the last stage of the



journey, during which I beat the 'security' black-out by going into the nose of the flying-boat and looking down at the countryside of Devon and Cornwall through the mooring hatch, was pure delight all the way—especially because the clouds were low and the rain slated down.

As the ridiculously small train carried me through the absurd, miniature countryside, in which one got the same pleasurable sense of claustrophobia as in Great-Aunt Bessie's Victorian drawing-room, I weighed up my two and a half years of travel over those fifty thousand miles. And I concluded that in normal times not even a millionaire could have bought himself the opportunity to do or see as much as had come to me in the course of my ordinary duties as a war correspondent.

For Britons and Americans, so far at least, this had not been a war of mud and trenches, but a wide-open, global war. A war of globe-trotters. A traveller's war—good training for the World Citizens of the future, if indeed the revived Nationalisms to which it has given rise enable us to bring such desirable characters to birth. . . .

And finally there came that oft-imagined moment when the small, fair face which had faded away from me that night at King's Cross—the night that had so often seemed to belong to another life—that face now swam to meet me out of the grey masses at Waterloo. I had been making allowances for Time, for I knew myself to be older, and no better. And so I was not prepared for what I saw.

For ten years I had believed Iris to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Perhaps she actually was? The supposition is immaterial. Of no marriage can one ask more than that it should begin with such a belief, which grows firmer with each year, against the menace of Reason itself, not to speak of the Law of Averages. And that day Belief won out afresh, against both its old adversaries.

My journey had not been without adventures; but this last, on platform 11 at Waterloo, is the one on which I like most to dwell. For it is an Adventure that continues.





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